

*So rural—  
yet so violent  
and vicious*

PENGUIN  
BOOKS

# Twelve Horses and the Hangman's Noose

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**Gladys Mitchell**

COMPLETE & UNABRIDGED



# **Twelve Horses and the Hangman's Noose**

***Gladys Mitchell***

**Bradley 29**

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## Contents

<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER ONE: OPENING MOVEMENT</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER TWO: HORSES AT HOME TO VISITORS</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER THREE: THOUGHTS ON A RURAL RIDE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER FOUR: INQUEST ON A DEAD HORSEMAN</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER FIVE: STABLE TALK</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER SIX: TOO MANY CATS</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER SEVEN: SAY IT WITH FLOWERS</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER EIGHT: IN RETROSPECT</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER NINE: A STALE SMELL OF RED HERRING</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER TEN: VEIN SPECULATION</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER ELEVEN: HORSES GO VISITING</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER TWELVE: EXPLORATION OF AVENUES</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE PENNY BEGINS TO DROP</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE MUSIC GOES ROUND AND ROUND</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE MYSTERY OF MR TURNBULL</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER SIXTEEN: OLD LADIES AT COFFEE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: THE MYSTERY OF TURNBULL DEEPENS</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: NO LIGHT ON A DARK HORSE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER NINETEEN: THEY ENDED THE RIDE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER TWENTY WITH THE LADIES INSIDE</u></a>

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John Mapsted kept twelve horses at his riding-stables. Eight were for hire, three came and went mysteriously in connexion with race meetings and one was for his own use. It was in the loose-box of the latter that they found his battered body, and the horse was squealing mad and had blood on its hoof.

The verdict of the inquest was Death by Misadventure, but Dame Beatrice Bradley, Gladys Mitchell's unique detective, began to make inquiries which uncovered one strange feature of the case after another.

TWELVE HORSES AND THE HANGMAN'S NOOSE

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Opening Movement

*‘O these are hard questions for my shallow wit,  
Nor I cannot answer your grace as yet.  
But if you will give me but three weeks’ space  
I’ll do my endeavour to answer your grace.’*

King John and the Abbot of Canterbury



‘NOW I wonder whether we’ve allowed for everything?’ said Mr Sebastian Bond, M.A., to Mr David Gadd, his head assistant. ‘Have you worked out the cloakroom accommodation yet?’

‘Yes, I have. The women can use that little place just behind the secretary’s office. It’s just inside the front door, and if we placard it boldly there should be no hitch.’

‘Oh, good. Now, about the Opener. It seems that Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley is the best, if we can get her. She’s famous, she’s a first-class speaker, and she’s more or less a local celebrity. I don’t really think we could do better.’

‘I agree, sir. But, even if she accepted the invitation, she’s a very busy professional woman, and if she got a sudden call — from her London clinic, for example — it would be very disconcerting for us. I really think we should have a substitute in mind if she accepts.’

‘Awkward, that.’

‘I agree, but I certainly feel—’

‘Yes, quite, but it’s very difficult to find a polite and inoffensive way of saying to a V.I.P., “Look here, we shall only want you if So-and-So can’t turn up!” People don’t like it at all.’

‘What about the Reverend Arthur Stoke? He’s supposed to exist in an odour of holy humility, isn’t he?’

‘Oh, Lord! I’ve put my foot in it there. I’ve asked the Reverend Charles Letts to read the prayers and announce the hymn, whereas I find that we’re actually in Stoke’s parish and he should have been the one asked.’

‘Can’t they share the job, sir?’

‘No, there isn’t even that solution, because I’d asked the Methodist chap to read the Lesson before I’d realised that the rest of it ought to have gone to Stoke. I’ll have to crawl to him, that’s all, but he won’t be highly delighted. And I don’t think he can be asked to Open. The Reverend Letts wouldn’t like it.’

‘Anyhow, sir, about this second string for the speaker—?’

‘I agree it’s a good idea, but, as I pointed out—’

‘Surely, sir, we can find *somebody* who doesn’t mind playing second fiddle in a good cause!’

The headmaster gave a slight smile.

‘My dear chap, there’s no such animal,’ he said. ‘Never mind. Now, what about decorations? The Governors insist on flowers, particularly as there will be ladies on the platform. We can get on to the Parks Committee to provide potted plants and things, but we shall have to buy the cut flowers for the vases out of School Fund. It seems rather a waste of money...’

‘Pity it isn’t the summer, sir. Most of the boys have gardens, and—’

‘Some of them take a short cut through the cemetery, too! I remember last year when that owlish, sycophantic boy Briggs brought some very suspect carnations to Miss Dobbins, that young woman we had on Supply when Gibson was away with sciatica. She showed them to me and asked me what I thought.’

‘And what did you say, sir?’

‘I told her not to look a gift horse in the mouth. On thinking it over, however, from what I know of Briggs I decided that I ought to have warned her to beware of the Greeks when they come bearing gifts. Now, then, what else?’

‘Remind the choir to have their school blazers cleaned and to wash behind their ears.’

‘Oh, yes, I’ve a long list of things to tell the boys, but I can do that after Assembly. Mrs Cann tells me that she and the canteen staff have everything in hand towards the refreshments, so *that’s* all right and a great weight off my mind. She has done the refreshments for two other official Openings, so she should know pretty well what’s required.’

‘Yes, sir, but the last time Mrs Cann and her helpers cooked for an official Opening, the teaching staff were somewhat browned off. They lived on veal loaf, boiled potatoes and tinned beetroot for a week, and there was never any sugar in the stewed plums because she was saving it all to make cakes.’

‘I know, I know. But I don’t see what to do about it. It really isn’t my pigeon. The Education Office have all the dealings with the canteen.’



‘Except when it comes to supervizing the boys at table,’ said the head assistant rather bitterly. It was his task to make out the rota of duty for this detested chore. ‘Well, if there’s nothing more, sir, I’ve got 3B upstairs doing a chemistry paper. The inky pellets should be going nicely by now.’

‘We’ve got to have the walls washed off and repainted, anyway, before the Opening,’ said Mr Bond, dismissing the inky pellets in a practical way. ‘There’s one more thing. I’ve already had more applications for seats than I can deal with. It’s the parents of course, who are the problem. We shall have exactly one hundred and sixty-five seats left when everybody else has been settled. How do you suggest we allot them? And another matter, not unconnected with that: how do we sort out the sheep from the goats when it comes to deciding the people to sit on the platform? Twenty County Councillors and eleven of our own local council have announced their intention of coming.’

While this conversation was going on in the headmaster’s room, in the school hall the chief caretaker, the senior art master and a squad of boys were putting up the stage curtains and refurbishing the school coat-of-arms above the proscenium arch, while the senior and junior music-masters, with a much larger and less manageable squad — the school choir — were canvassing the possibility of massing eighty choristers in a space scarcely large enough for thirty. They were assisted by overtones of questions and undertones of running commentary.

‘Please, sir, I’m squashed right up, sir. I can’t breathe.’

‘Sir, I get asthma, sir. Can I be in the front row?’

‘I can’t see over Gregson’s head, sir. I’m singing straight into his beastly dirty neck, sir.’

‘My neck isn’t dirty, you clot! Shut your big head! Sir, it’s Jolly’s foul breath, sir. It’s putting a sort of smog on my collar, sir.’

‘I feel sick, sir. Can I go out?’

‘Sir, are we singing the National Anthem *and* the School Song, sir?’

‘The School Song’s lousy.’

‘Sir, do we *have* to sing the School Song, sir?’

All this noise was punctuated by a certain amount of scientific shin-hacking, blasphemy, pin-sticking, realistic sounds of retching and vomiting, and the unheeded but vociferous upbraidings of the masters in charge. All other noise was drowned suddenly by screams of joy from the so-far bored and disgruntled choir at the sight of four workmen crawling one after the other out of the dark cavern under the stage.

‘Oh, sir! Prehistoric Man, sir!’

‘Have they been buried alive, sir?’

‘Trogloodytes.’

‘No, they’ve been hiding from the police, you ass.’

‘Sir, have *you* ever been underneath the stage, sir?’

‘Be quiet, boy, and get in there next to Smith.’

‘But Smith’s a *treble*, sir, and I’m alto.’

‘Get in, get in, and don’t argue.’

‘I shall lose my note, sir, if I’m next to Smith.’

‘Old Smithy stinks!’

And so on. The senior music master was in receipt of a Special Responsibility allowance. His junior had no such solace.

In the staffroom, which was situated on the first floor of the building, young Mr Spencer, mathematics, was conversing with Mr Milstrom, senior English.

‘The old man,’ said Mr Spencer, ‘expects a damn sight too much. Empire Day half-holiday! I ask you! And here are we expected to attend this blasted Opening. What T.U.C. member would stand for it? I tell you we’re morons, slaves and defeatists in this profession.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Mr Milstrom. ‘Must back up the issue, don’t you think? After all, it can only happen once.’

‘Thin edge of the wedge,’ said Mr Spencer. ‘Once let them think they can pinch our half-holidays and take us back to this damned place in the evenings, and where shall we be? Parent-Teacher Associations will be the next thing. The Secondary Modern has got one already.’

‘Well, you stay night after night with the boys for films,’ pointed out Mr Milstrom, reasonably. ‘Nobody makes you do that.’

That’s just what I mean,’ protested Mr Spencer. ‘It’s this blasted officialdom that makes my blood boil.’

As most things connected with Mr Spencer’s work did this, Mr Milstrom took no more notice and corrected half an essay in an exercise book labelled ‘C. Smith, Esquire, Form Bloody 4C Limited. Officers and Gentlemen Only.’ Then he sighed, put on the electric fire, opened a couple of windows and lit a cigarette.

‘Life’s what you make it,’ he said. ‘C. Smith. Esquire, knows that.’

‘Who’s coming to *do* the Opening, anyway?’

‘Dame Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley, D.B.E., if the Head can get her,’

‘Dame How-Much?’

‘You know — vetted the psychology of the Women’s Forces, or something,

during the war.’

‘All those women needed their heads looked at, certainly,’ said Mr Spencer morosely. His fiancée had joined the W.R.N.S. and had followed up this enterprising action by falling in love with, and marrying, an up-and-coming submarine lieutenant. Mr Milstrom, who happened to know this, since the fiancée had been a young friend of a sister of his, let it stand at that, and corrected, in slashing red ink, the remainder of C. Smith’s essay.

‘Smith isn’t too bad at English, really,’ he remarked, viciously underlining a singular verb which followed a plural noun. ‘The boy isn’t such a moron as he looks.’

‘He told me that a parallelogram is a woman parachutist’s weight expressed in French,’ said Mr Spencer bitterly. ‘Impudent lout!’

‘Very probably, but I call him basically intelligent. How do you spell “disappeared”?’

‘One s, two p’s.’

‘I thought so, but so many of 4C appear to hold a different opinion that I thought I must be wrong. Wonder whether La Cowley has made the tea?’

In her office the school secretary was on the telephone.

‘Yes?... No... Oh, well, they broke the window themselves, so they’ll have to make it good. They put the end of their ladder through it... Yes, I’ll tell him what you say, but I know he won’t agree... Yes, I see. Good-bye.’

She rang through on the house-telephone and interrupted the conversation between the headmaster and his chief of staff.

‘Oh, Mr Bond, I’ve just been through to the contractors about that broken window in Mr Gapp’s room. They want to say the boys broke it.’

‘It makes no difference who broke it,’ said the headmaster wearily. ‘It’s got to be mended, anyway. Anything else, Miss Cowley?’

‘Yes. I’ve typed your letter to Dame Beatrice. Do you want it to go off by this afternoon’s post? If so, you’ll have to sign it at once.’

‘Very well. Bring it along.’

‘Right, Mr Bond.’

‘And what I say,’ the headmaster went on, continuing his previous conversation, ‘is that the other local heads, Junior and Secondary Moderns, must all be invited, and heaven help us to find room for them if they all accept — and they probably will! Oh, come in.’ He touched his buzzer to reinforce this command, and the secretary entered trippingly.

‘Everything seems to be going quite hotsy-totsy,’ she remarked, as she

handed over the letter.

‘Glad you think so,’ said the headmaster. ‘Now, ought I to put my *wife* on the platform?’ he enquired of his head assistant when the secretary had gone.

‘We *need* ladies in support of Dame Beatrice,’ said Mr Gadd, who had never met that redoubtable lady. The headmaster nodded, pleased, and added his wife’s name to his list. ‘What about the Old Boys?’ Mr Gadd went on. ‘Ought we not to invite a few of them? After all, this building was begun in 1939, just before the war started, and we had three forms in, if you remember, as soon as the gym and the first two rooms were habitable.’

‘But where are we to *put* them?’ demanded the headmaster. ‘In any case, since that bomb fell and finished off all the old registers at County Hall, I don’t know where any of them live. Of course, Turnbull is an Old Boy himself. Isn’t he sufficiently representative, don’t you think?’

‘Well, he’d do for one. Then there’s Nottingham, who’s gone in for horses or something, and Mapsted, who’s done the same.’

‘Really? I didn’t know that—but, of course, I’m fairly new here. I didn’t know any of those boys.’

‘Well, living fairly near to them, I believe, is Grinsted. You wouldn’t remember Grinsted, either, sir. His father was a farmer and the boy used to bring eggs to sell to the staff. He was a surly, unmannerly boy, but I think he had a hard time at home. I could get in touch with them, sir, if you thought it a good plan. You see, we might be considered snobbish if we relied only on Turnbull, as he’s employed on the staff.’

‘He’s only the woodwork master,’ Mr Bond pointed out. ‘It is stretching a point, perhaps, to refer to him as a member of the staff — not that one wants to be undemocratic, of course. Very well, then,’ he continued hastily, ‘get in touch with those you mentioned and we’ll squeeze them in somehow, although I must confess I don’t see how. One thing,’ he added, as hope dawned, ‘they probably won’t accept. The school, as they knew it, has been swallowed up, since building on this site was resumed. I should think they would show very little interest.’

On this optimistic note the conference ended. Mr Gadd went aloft to deal with 3B, now reduced, through lack of ink and blotting-paper, to the coarser pleasures of physical combat, and Mr Bond, with a sigh, picked up an insistent telephone receiver and grimly recited the school number.

When he had answered the telephone Mr Bond buzzed for Miss Cowley.

‘Please obtain from Mr Gadd the addresses of some Old Boys he knows of and send each of them an invitation.’

‘Sure, Mr Bond. Shall I include Mr Turnbull?’

‘There is no occasion to do that. Mr Turnbull,’ said Mr Bond, repenting of his previous verdict, ‘is on the staff and therefore needs no invitation.’

‘Very well, Mr Bond. Seems funny to think of Old Boys when the school is being Opened, though, doesn’t it?’

‘Very. The war was responsible for much. That will be all, Miss Cowley, thank you.’

‘Good-o,’ said the secretary cheerily. ‘With the staff yelling their heads off for a nice cuppa, it’s just as well, really.’

‘Tea,’ began Mr Bond austerely — but Miss Cowley had gone. She was immediately replaced by Mr Gadd.

‘There’s another thing about Turnbull,’ he said. ‘I think we ought to bear in mind that he designed and executed the metal plaque commemorating Old Boys of the previous building who served in the war.’

‘Oh, yes, yes. I must get Dame Beatrice, or whoever the speaker is, to mention it.’

‘I feel, too,’ Mr Gadd continued, ‘that he should be in front, and not be given a job behind the scenes where no one will see him.’

‘He’s of no use behind the scenes, in any case,’ said Mr Bond. ‘At the school play, if you remember, middle boys raided his toolshed and purloined screwdrivers and removed the number plates from visitors’ cars. A most disgraceful business which brought discredit on us all.’

‘That was not Turnbull’s fault, sir. He was responsible, if you remember, for any stage carpentry which might need repairing or adjusting. He really was not in a position—’

‘He was in a position to put his keys in Miss Cowley’s office, where they would have been safely locked up, instead of leaving them on a bench in the woodwork room!’ snapped Mr Bond.

‘He explained that he thought he might need them to get tools quickly, should any of the scenery need attention.’

‘Then he should have trousered them. He is most unreliable,’ Mr Bond thus put an indisputable termination to the argument and Mr Gadd retired to the staff-room for tea.

Miss Cowley sent off the letters of invitation in due course, and the Old Boys whom Mr Gadd had named were surprised and not unduly delighted to receive theirs. Grinsted, whose nature had not altered since his schooldays, grunted and threw the letter into the fire. Mapsted re-read his and put it into his jacket pocket.

Nottingham gave a short laugh followed by a contemptuous expletive, tore his across and threw the pieces over the hedge into the lane which bordered his paddock. Turnbull, grudgingly admitted by Mr Bond to full membership of the staff, received his invitation by word of mouth from Mr Gadd.

‘The Old Man says that as an Old Boy you can attend the Opening in that capacity, Turnbull.’

The disgruntled Mr Spencer, who was leaving at the end of term as much by Mr Bond’s wish as by his own, laughed loudly and said:

‘Don’t forget to wash behind the ears, my little man!’ He added, in a different tone, ‘*How* I’d like to see this blasted Opening come a mucker and the Old Man look a fool!’

‘You’d better shut up,’ said Turnbull in a low voice, nodding towards Mr Gadd.

‘I’ve nothing to lose,’ retorted Mr Spencer.

‘The condemned man made a short speech,’ said Mr Milstrom.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### Horses at Home to Visitors

*‘... their gentle nature and docility, their comely shape, their lofty pace, their clean trotting ...’*

Blundeville



MR BOND’S school was at Seahampton, in what was called the New Town. The old town was known as Seahampton Harbour but was usually referred to as Old Seahampton. It was built on one side of a wide creek much favoured by yachtsmen during the summer. In winter the creek presented a forest of deciduous masts.

Dame Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley, Opener-Elect of the Grammar School, could scarcely be regarded as a *local* celebrity for, although she was certainly celebrated, she lived a good many miles from Seahampton, being domiciled, when she was not in London, at the Stone House in the village of Wandles Parva, on the fringe of the New Forest.

As it happened, one of her near neighbours was John Mapsted, who was part-owner of the Elkstonehunt riding-stables at the opposite end of the village. John owned twelve horses, four of which were never let out on hire. Three were known to take part in mysterious comings and goings and were racehorses. The fourth, a horse named Percheron, he kept as his own mount. In spite of its name it had none of the characteristics of that famous French breed but was a graceful and talented hunter of Irish descent, long-legged, long-bodied, chestnut in colour and known in the neighbourhood as being of irresponsible behaviour. The only persons it would tolerate, in fact, were its owner and Mrs Laura Gavin, née Menzies, Dame Beatrice’s efficient and lively secretary. Even to Laura, however, Percheron was never let out on hire. She rode a likable and rather showy horse named Mustang. It was the idiosyncrasy of John Mapsted to have called each of his horses after a particular breed, but never after the breed to which it actually belonged.

On the morning when Dame Beatrice was destined to receive Mr Bond’s

courteously-worded invitation to ‘open’ his school, Laura, as was her custom in fine weather, went down through the village to the Elkstonehunt stables to have Mustang out for an hour before breakfast. It was seven o’clock on a beautiful, fine, clear morning, and in spite of breeches and boots she walked briskly.

When she reached the double gates of Mapsted’s place, she saw the doctor’s car. It was coming from the stables, not from the house. Neither she nor Dame Beatrice was ever ill, but she had become acquainted with the doctor because they met at tennis parties, at as many of the village functions as he found leisure to attend, and at church, so that she was not at all surprised when he pulled up, opened his window and put his head out to speak to her.

‘Shouldn’t go up there this morning,’ he said. ‘Been a very nasty accident.’

‘John?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid so. It seems as though that brute he rides has turned on him at last.’

‘Oh, dear! Not Percheron? Is John badly hurt?’

‘Worse than that.’

‘Not...?’

‘Yes. The horse must have kicked him on the head.’

‘Good Lord! What a frightful thing to happen! I can’t believe it!’

‘You would if you’d seen what I’ve just seen. I’m off now to get an ambulance to take him to the Seahampton Infirmary. There will have to be a post-mortem and an inquest. I’ve had to break the news to his mother, poor old lady. She’s a plucky old thing. Took it squarely.’

‘Well, I should never have thought it of Percheron,’ said Laura slowly. ‘Could there be another explanation?’

‘Only if somebody has clumped Mapsted over the head with a heavy mallet, and, considering that Jenkinson, the groom, found him lying in the stable and the horse squealing mad, and blood on the horse’s hoof, I’m afraid the circumstantial evidence is against the brute. I should think they’ll have him shot, the murdering beast.’

‘I still can’t believe it,’ said Laura. ‘Percheron *is* temperamental, but he was as good as gold with John. It doesn’t make *sense*.’

‘Whether it does or not, it’s happened, although, as a matter of fact, there *are* one or two things which don’t quite fit. In fact, I’d like another opinion.’

‘Where is John — where is the body now?’

‘Still in Percheron’s loose-box. Jenkinson managed to get the horse out and has put him in the paddock. We could have taken poor Mapsted up to the house



but old Mrs Mapsted did not think there was any point in it as I was going to send to Seahampton in any case. Look here, let me run you home. I'd like to talk to Dame Beatrice, and perhaps have her see the body before we move it.'

'How long ago did it happen? I mean, how long do you think he's been dead?'

'That's the bit that puzzles me. I won't say any more, though, until Dame Beatrice has seen him. If her opinion coincides with mine we shall have quite a small mystery on our hands.'

He would add nothing to this intriguing statement. Laura got into the car and they drove the short distance to the Stone House in silence. Laura had plenty to think about, and presumably Doctor Rollins was equally thoughtful. Laura, firm in her conviction that the last person Percheron would have savaged was his owner and rider, was trying to imagine any other circumstance, short of murder, which could have brought about Mapsted's death. As to Rollins' guarded reply to her question relating to the probable time of death, she could put two and two together there without difficulty. She felt she had no need to ask him what had puzzled him.

Dame Beatrice was at breakfast when they reached the Stone House. They joined her, for Rollins had been summoned straight from bed to the Elkstonehunt stables. Over eggs, bacon and coffee, he told her all that he knew about the accident to John Mapsted, and immediately the meal was finished he and Laura's employer went to inspect the body.

While they were gone, Laura dealt, as was her custom, with the correspondence and read the headmaster's letter. There had been a previous communication by telephone, and she knew that Dame Beatrice had accepted the invitation provisionally.

Laura made a face at the letter. She objected to what, in her opinion, were frivolous and unnecessary calls upon Dame Beatrice's time. She knew from experience, however, that it was her employer's invariable custom to obtain some amusement and satisfaction out of attending the most boring of functions, so she put the letter into Dame Beatrice's tray and opened the next envelope in the pile.

Her mind, however, was only partly on her work. It was also running on the surprising and untimely death of John Mapsted. She felt no overwhelming grief, but the news had been a shock, for she and the riding-school proprietor had been mildly but consistently friendly and had known each other for a couple of years or more. She had a ready reply, therefore, to Dame Beatrice's question at lunch.

‘Well, what do *you* think about it?’

Laura shrugged.

‘I don’t believe the horse savaged John,’ she said. ‘What was Doctor Rollins puzzled about? There was something in particular, wasn’t there?’

‘Yes, there was. I’ll give you three guesses.’

‘I believe I need only one. It was something to do with the time of death. In other words, Percheron started his squealing and all his fuss too late. Is that what’s worrying our medico?’

‘Well!’ said Dame Beatrice, impressed. ‘You are quite right. Doctor Rollins and I think that Mr Mapsted died an hour one side or the other of midnight, and most certainly not between six and seven in the morning.’

‘Golly!’ exclaimed Laura. ‘If Percheron had kicked John to death, he’d have squealed out at the time he did it. Why didn’t anybody hear him? Cissie Gauberon’s room faces that way and she’s a light sleeper, and Jenkinson, the groom, has the attic above. One of them, if not both, would have been bound to hear the horse.’

‘Quite so. Yet Jenkinson asserts that the horse made no fuss until daylight. It certainly seems very strange.’

‘Strange is the word,’ agreed Laura. ‘Besides, Percheron didn’t kick John. I’d take a pretty considerable bet on that. You saw the body, I suppose?’

‘Yes, of course. The injuries certainly support the theory that poor Mr Mapsted died from being struck on the head, but the time-factor and, as you say, the known fact that the horse was fond of its master, seem to indicate that—’

‘That poor old John was murdered,’ said Laura, who had immediately jumped to this conclusion when she heard that Doctor Rollins was not satisfied. Dame Beatrice pursed her beaky mouth and looked dubious.

‘I don’t think we can postulate such a theory at present,’ she said.

‘Well, is there any objection to my going over and having a word with Cissie Gauberon — condolences and all that?’ Laura demanded.

‘You could walk over and talk to Miss Gauberon, of course. She will probably talk freely to you, as you know her so well.’

‘To know isn’t a synonym for to like,’ said Laura, ‘but I must say I’d like to get the dope, if there is any to be got.’

‘I don’t know what to think,’ said Cissie when Laura arrived. ‘Yes, they’ve taken him to Seahampton. There’ll have to be an inquest, of course.’

‘But what do you think really happened?’

‘I haven’t a clue. All I know is that Jenkinson came yelling for me some time

before seven, so I went along to the stables because, of course, I'd heard the horse myself. I was up and dressed, as a matter of fact.'

'What about Percheron?'

'Sweating all over. Stood guard over John's body. Very difficult to get anywhere near.'

'So then you sent for Doctor Rollins?'

'No, Jenkinson had already done that.'

'Look here,' said Laura earnestly, 'it's not quite good enough, is it?'

Cissie looked at the top of a tree behind Laura's left shoulder and shrugged hopelessly.

'I don't know what to think,' she said. 'To begin with, I can't see what John was doing in the stables at that time. We don't feed the horses all that early at this season of the year, and, in any case, it was Jenkinson's business, not his. There wasn't a mare in-foal, or anything of that sort, you know. I simply can't conceive what he was doing in the stables at that hour. And, anyway, Percheron always let us know whenever John went to visit him. Whinnied with joy. Of course,' she added sourly, 'if he did kick John to death, I suppose he'll have to be destroyed.'

Laura nodded.

'I suppose you'll still keep on the stables?' she said. 'I mean, this won't make any difference in that sort of way?'

Cissie raised her arms from her sides and let them drop back again. Her thin, rather monkey-like face expressed resignation.

'*Quien sabe?*' she said. 'Anyway, I need a partner. I suppose — you living near and all that — you wouldn't care to buy a half-interest?'

'I rather think not,' said Laura slowly. 'I'd have to take time to work it out. I should be a sleeping partner, anyway. I couldn't find the time to work here. I'm kept pretty busy.'

'If I could find someone to put up a bit of cash, my sister would come and help on the actual job,' said Cissie. 'Do think it over, Laura. It's quite a sporting venture, and, of course, you'd always get a free mount. The inquest is tomorrow,' she went on. 'I've got to give evidence, worse luck.'

'What is going to happen to the stables? Will Mr Mapsted's partner keep them open?' asked Dame Beatrice Bradley when Laura got back to the Stone House.

'She wants to. As a matter of fact, she's asked me whether I'd like to come in with her. Take a share, you know. Money seems to be short.'

‘Shall you fall in with the suggestion?’

‘Nope,’ said Laura decidedly. ‘I don’t much like her, and, anyway, I don’t believe in underwriting a tottering economy. Besides, I’ve a hunch that she knows something more about John’s death than she says. Personally, I’m going to give the matter some earnest thought. There’s a lot of undercurrent about, if you ask me, and stranger things will happen yet, I feel.’

‘Was the horse thought to be ill? There has been no mention of anything of the kind,’ was all Dame Beatrice said in response to this vague prophecy.

‘Percheron? No, he wasn’t ill. The fact that John was killed at that time of night only lends colour to what I say. The horse *couldn’t* have killed him. I’m going to work on the presumption that somebody murdered him and made it look like animal savagery. I shall employ my full powers to shift the blame to where it belongs. I feel I should champion the horse.’

Any suggestion from Laura that she proposed to employ what, entirely erroneously, she considered to be her detective faculties always caused in her employer some feeling of unease. Dame Beatrice did not betray this. She said simply, ‘I hear that when the body was discovered by the stableman he had no doubt that the horse was to blame.’

‘Jenkinson doesn’t like Percheron. He would put anything on him if he had the shadow of an excuse,’ protested Laura. ‘Personally, I shall never even believe that John was killed in Percheron’s stable. There *must* be evidence to show that he wasn’t. I pin my faith to the old Holmes’ gag about the dog that did nothing in the night. If Percheron did nothing in the night he jolly well wasn’t kicking John’s head in; whereas, when he *did* set up that squealing, the body was put into his loose-box. That’s as plain as daylight to me. He’d only have to smell blood to go crazy, a nervous, temperamental horse like that. There are questions I am certainly going to ask Jenkinson. In fact, if there is nothing in particular that you want me for, I’ll go over tomorrow and see him.’

‘Go, by all means, but beware of stirring up a hornets’ nest. You know what a village is for gossip!’

‘I’ll be as cunning as a serpent, I promise you.’

Mrs Bradley had no great faith in Laura’s discretion, a fact which, mercifully, was hidden from that seeker after truth, but she made no further attempt to warn her against saying anything which the village might misconstrue.

Laura, convinced that fact, not theory, was in question, disguised the true object of her visit next day by changing into breeches and boots before she walked over to the riding stables. The stables formed two sides of a large

rectangle and wooden railings enclosed a grass paddock. The house in which John Mapsted had lived with his widowed mother and his helpers was distant about a hundred yards from the eastern side of the paddock, and was separated from it by a large chicken-run, a modern piggery, and a sizeable kitchen garden, these three additions to the establishment being the province of old Mrs Mapsted herself, who made a modest living out of them and had never been dependent on her son.

The old lady was flaking mud off a promising porker when Laura arrived. Laura stood and watched. Mrs Mapsted continued her operations until she was satisfied with the result, then she straightened up and remarked, as though in echo of Dame Beatrice, 'Well, and what do *you* think?'

'Think?' said Laura, playing for time and a cue. She was accustomed to the old lady's abrupt conversational methods, but realized that the question could have been applied to the death of Mapsted, the pig's toilet, the latest news about the Russians, the state of the weather or the previous night's television programme. It was always as well to give Mrs Mapsted time to indicate the subject of her choice.

'Think? Think?' squealed the beldame. 'I mean, what do you think of Percheron now?'

Laura looked her in the eye and answered:

'Just what I always thought of him. He's a pest of an animal, but he isn't a killer.'

'Glad you think so. Come along and see him before you go for your ride. Cissie Gauberon's a fool. Always said so. All I could do to keep that idiot Jack from marrying her, but I managed it. And as for Jenkinson, he ought to get the sack. That's what I say. Drunk more than half his time. Can't think why Jack and Cissie kept him on.'

'I'll have to talk to Mustang first,' said Laura, referring to the horse she invariably hired. 'He'll never get over it if I make him play second fiddle to Percheron. Has anybody else been in this morning?'

'Yes, the Colonel's three children came in a while ago and took out Basuto, Shan and Connemara as usual. This new governess of theirs came with them. Bit heavy-handed for Palomino, but nearly everything else is on regular hire. Have you met her?—Temme by name.'

'Palomino is too sweet-tempered, that's his trouble,' said Laura. 'No, I haven't met Miss Temme.'

'Haven't missed much,' said old Mrs Mapsted viciously. 'Don't like

governesses. Why don't they get an honest job? Out-moded, and so I told the Colonel.'

'I think the Colonel has tried sending those children to school, but they don't seem to fit,' said Laura. 'Well, I'll go and see Mustang and Percheron.'

'Have a good talk with Percheron. He's feeling ill-used and depressed. And the vet's with Viatka. She's off her oats again.'

'She misses John,' said Laura. The old lady nodded.

'I dare say,' she agreed, displaying indifference. 'Jack was good with horses. Well, go along, then. You'll like a gossip with Andrew Scott, but, remember, Jack's horses come first.'

Laura went to Mustang's stable. The horse, although showy, was a very mild, friendly creature. He whinnied as Laura approached and put his head out to be given sugar. Next to him in the stables was a mare named Jennet. She was let out on hire to any casual client who did not make regular use of John Mapsted's stables, but when no such rider turned up, the partner, Cissie Gauberon, rode the mare. This meant that, to all intents and purposes, except during occasional weekends and for a few weeks in summer, Jennet was Cissie Gauberon's mount, and it was known that Cissie hated it if anyone else should ride her.

Laura spoke to Jennet and gave her some sugar, and then passed on to talk to a handsome chestnut gelding and to pass the time of day with the veterinary surgeon, Andrew Scott, who had been treating the mare Viatka for a kick.

'How is she?' Laura enquired. Andrew smiled. He was a slightly-built, brown-haired man of thirty-five or so. He and Laura had known one another for several years and were friends.

'She'll be all right. Got a nasty kick — I can't think how. Mrs Cofts doesn't hunt, and she rides alone or with the Colonel's kids usually. I asked her whether she could account for Viatka's getting kicked, and she can't. One comfort — it's not a fracture, only a nasty bruise.'

'Whereabouts is the bruise?'

'Back of the near forefoot.'

'Mayn't she have over-reached?'

'Could have done, but she never has before. Mrs Cofts doesn't jump her, either. It's usually on a jump that horses over-reach.'

'Mrs Cofts may have galloped her over boggy ground, though.'

'Yes, that's true. There *are* boggy patches in the Forest at this time of year after snow. Anyway, I've given a fomentation, which ought to ease the pain. The skin isn't broken, fortunately.'

‘I should have thought that Cissie Gauberon could have dealt with a bruise herself.’

‘She could have done, but she’s been very busy and has had a trying time since poor old John’s death. There’s a mystery for you, now. I should never have thought that Percheron was a killer.’

Laura debated whether she should acquaint Andrew Scott with her own opinion on this matter, but decided against it, and they made the rest of the round together. When they had finished, Laura turned away from a charming Arab called Barb, and said abruptly:

‘I want to talk to you, Andrew. It’s about John’s death. Do you — this is off the record, of course — but do you believe that Percheron *is* a killer?’

‘Hard to say,’ the cautious Scott replied. ‘It’s not a hanging matter for a horse to kill a man, and if it wasn’t Percheron it must have been Old Nick in the shape of a horse. I saw the body, you know. It wasn’t a very nice thing to see, either. The horse must have gone mad.’

‘Was there much blood?’

‘Not a lot, so Jenkinson says. He’d swabbed up as soon as he could, so, of course, I saw nothing of it myself, and neither, I believe, did Doctor Rollins.’

‘If *I’d* had anything to do with it,’ said Laura in a low tone, ‘I should have had that blood examined to find out whether it was of the same group as John’s. I don’t believe for a single instant that Percheron killed him. Was there much blood on Percheron’s hoofs?’

‘On the near forefoot, it seems. It’s of no use, Laura. I don’t like to say so, but, on the face of it, the horse must be guilty, and he’s a stubborn, awkward brute when he likes, as you probably know.’

He got into the ancient car which he used on his rounds, waved his hand, and went off with a roar which made even the well-behaved Mustang fling up his head.

‘Steady,’ said Laura reproachfully. ‘Now, where’s that be-sozzled old groom?’

She shouted for Jenkinson, and a shambling gnome bearing a bucket came round the wall of the kitchen garden.

‘What be after, Mrs Gavin?’ he enquired in a husky voice. ‘Ee can have Mustang out if ee wants to. Master may be gone, but ’ay and corn still got to be paid for, I reckon.’

‘Look here, Jenkinson, before I have Mustang out, I want you to tell me about Mr Mapsted’s death.’

The groom set down the bucket and scratched his head.

‘Minds me on a Shakespeare play I seed once at the Village Institoot,’ he said surprisingly. ‘Chap in the play, ’e says, “I can as well be ’anged as tell on the manner of it,” ’e says, and that goes for me, Mrs Gavin. I can’t say any more but what I’ve said a’ready. There was all this stampin’ and squealin’ and tossy-pottin’ about, and I pulls on me trousers and runs to see who’s murderin’ who, and I finds Mr John layin’ there all mucky blood and ’is ’ead bashed in, and Percheron screamin’ the place down.’

‘But, Jenkinson, do you really believe the horse did it?’

‘Blest if there’s anything else to believe, Mrs Gavin. If ’e didn’t, what did? ’E’s got a wicious streak, ’as Percherong. Always ’as ’ad. If I’ve said once to Mr John, I’ve said an ’underd times, “You did ought to get rid of that ’orse. Mark my words, ’e’ll do someone a mischief one of these days.” Mind you, Mrs Gavin, I never thought as it ’ud be the master ’e’d turn on. No, I can’t say I ever thought that.’

‘Oh, well,’ said Laura, ‘it’s happened, anyway.’

She did not give the groom, who had a local reputation for talking wildly in his cups, the doctor’s information as to the time of death. It would be soon enough to hear that at the inquest, where, she supposed, Jenkinson would be the star witness. She saddled Mustang, mounted him, and rode thoughtfully out of the gate which Jenkinson opened. A quiet amble along the Forest rides, followed by a gallop over the open country, was what her mood demanded. She turned Mustang’s head to the southward, along the sandy lane.

When they arrived at the beginning of the woodland, the horse, from long habit, turned to the right and took Laura through an opening beside a stile and followed a narrow baulk of trodden earth which formed a path beside an arable field. On Laura’s right was a hedge broken here and there by oak-trees. On her left was the stretch of ploughland, but within two hundred yards of the stile the woodland began. The path continued as a natural avenue. The horse meandered on, the reins slack and his head free, and Laura, as much at ease in the saddle as a Mexican, thought her own thoughts and, because she was preoccupied, ignored the first signs of the spring — the hazels drooping their catkins, the tall elms heavily flowered, the shallow brown brook and the willows’ shining-stemmed palm-buds; every copse shouting with birds and the grass emerald-green after snow.

Her preoccupation lasted until she reached an open glade of the forest. Here she dismounted and led the horse. The air was keen but there was very little



breeze. She put away the thoughts that had come between her and the sights and sounds of the spring and began to enjoy herself.

The enjoyment, however, was shortlived. She came upon a pitiable dabble of blood and feathers, the remains of a battle and a feast, and pondered again the circumstances of Mapsted's death. She remounted, left the reins loose and offered the route to Mustang, who ambled amiably homeward.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### Thoughts on a Rural Ride

*‘Though every prospect pleases,  
And only man is vile.’*

Heber



ON the way back to the Elkstonehunt stables, Laura was thinking hard. It seemed likely, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that John Mapsted had indeed met his death by a kick on the head, and if this were so, and the kick had not been administered by Percheron, John must have received the blow from some other horse. As no horse in the Elkstonehunt establishment seemed likely to kick its owner, the logical supposition was that he had been killed at some other riding-stables.

‘And, of course,’ said Laura aloud, ‘riding-stables are two-a-penny round here.’

This statement, like a good many of hers, was an exaggeration, but within range there were certainly two stables besides Elkstonehunt. One was kept by the bold young man named Nottingham who had torn up his invitation to be present at the official opening of his old school’s new premises; the other belonged to a pleasant Irishman named Paddy Donegal. There was also, at no great distance from Wandles Parva village, a farm owned by that other unpatriotic Old Boy, the surly and uncouth Grinsted. He also had one or two horses.

Laura’s imagination, always extremely active, began to assert itself strongly. By the time the forest path ended and she came out on to the road, she had a workable theory about the cause of Mapsted’s death and the disposal of his body. This was that Mapsted had met with a fatal accident at the farm or one of the riding-schools and that the owner of the horse which had killed him had shipped his body back to his own place to make it appear that his own horse was responsible.

‘Save a lot of bother,’ thought Laura. ‘Now who would think along those

lines?’

Grinsted, because of his known character, came first to her mind, but Jed Nottingham had a bad reputation in some respects and was, Laura thought, the type to shed the load if to retain it meant trouble or inconvenience.

‘I don’t *think* Paddy Donegal would have done such a thing if the accident had happened at *his* place,’ Laura decided, ‘but fair’s fair, and if I go and pump the others I ought to see him, too.’

Another thought came to her. There was still another riding-school in the vicinity. It was kept by a dowdy woman named Merial Trowse. She was known to be extremely poor. If she had a rogue horse she would be very reluctant to have it destroyed, even if it had killed a man. It might have been a great temptation to Merial, if Mapsted had died at her place, to shift the body and make the death look like Percheron’s work.

‘I’m not sure that she isn’t likelier than any of the men,’ thought Laura. ‘Right! I’ll visit Paddy Donegal first and get him wiped off the slate.’

She turned Mustang in the direction of Linghurst Magna. She had met Paddy in the hunting field and what she knew about him she liked. She had fabricated a reason for visiting him. It was to ask him whether he thought it would be worth her while to go into partnership with Cissie Gauberon, although she had already decided against this.

She found Paddy and his groom watering and feeding horses, for it was almost midday by the time she reached Linghurst Magna. Paddy said:

‘Hullo, Mrs Gavin! What’s on your mind?’

‘Mustang,’ said Laura. ‘He’s thirsty, too.’

‘Water him, Matt,’ said Paddy to the groom. Laura nodded her thanks, and then said,

‘Paddy, Cissie wants me to go into partnership.’

‘Does she?’ He looked surprised. ‘Not your kettle of fish, Mrs Gavin. Don’t touch it.’

‘Why not, particularly?’

‘Too much like hard work, for one thing; takes a lot of time, for another; no money in it, for a third.’

Laura looked round at his well-kept stableyard and handsome, contented horses, and laughed aloud.

‘I suppose *you’re* not looking for a partner, Paddy?’ she asked.

‘Me? No. If I did, I’d have a bloke, not a lady.’

‘Discourteous, unchivalrous man! Merial Trowse, though, doesn’t do too

well, so I hear.'

'John Mapsted,' said Donegal suddenly, 'was going to marry Merial. Did you know?'

'I certainly didn't! What would she have done? Sold up at Hurst St. Johns and gone to live at Elkstonehunt?'

'I have no idea. I heard about the engagement from Jed Nottingham. *His* comment was that he'd rather John than himself.'

'I think I'd be inclined to agree. I don't care much for Merial.'

'Don't you? Any special reason?'

'Only a horsy one. She thinks that, for a horse when he hasn't got a customer on his back, lunging is sufficient exercise. I certainly don't agree.'

'She hasn't much help at Hurst St. Johns, you see. I don't really know why she kept on the stables when her old man died. And now I think you ought to come clean. What are you up to, Mrs G.?'

'How do you mean? I came over to ask you a question and, after a fashion, you've answered it.'

'Nonsense, my dear Mrs Gavin! You haven't thought *once* about teaming-up with Cissie! You came to get the low-down about something quite different. What was it?'

'If you're so clever,' retorted Laura, annoyed that her ruse had failed, 'you can answer the question yourself.'

'Come into the house for a drink, then, and I will. As a matter of fact, if you hadn't come to see me, I was going to contact your Dame Bradley.'

'Dame Beatrice Adela to you! Then you think—'

'Wait until we get inside.' He nodded significantly towards the groom.

'Matt's all right, but he loves a gossip as much as does any old woman. We don't want ugly rumours flying about.'

They went into the house and Paddy led the way into his big, shabby dining-room which was also the family living-room.

'How's Diana?' asked Laura, seating herself by the fire.

'Only so-so. Our third is expected in May and she doesn't seem terribly fit. I'm a bit worried, as a matter of fact. She's off her oats, yet when Pat and young Shaun were coming she ate like a cart-horse. Now, look here,' he went on, cutting short Laura's civil expressions of concern, 'let's get down to it before she comes in from the kitchen.' He opened the door of the sideboard and brought out in relays a decanter, a siphon, another decanter and two glasses. 'Scotch or sherry? Scotch? stout woman! Say when. Here you are, squirt for yourself.'

‘Thanks,’ said Laura, taking the glass and squirting soda very carefully. ‘Yes, well, it’s about John’s death. It looks as though he was kicked and trampled by a horse. If that be so, the question is — *whose* horse?’

‘I know.’ Paddy poured himself a generous three fingers which came nearly half-way up the tumbler, looked unenthusiastically at the siphon, shook his head slightly and raised his glass. ‘Cheers. I know. That’s the devil of it. But what can anybody do? They won’t even adjourn the inquest. It’ll be all over and done with — Accidental Death — by this time tomorrow, and, anyway, you can’t hang a horse.’

‘You can find out who is the owner of the horse.’

‘But can you? Better to leave things as they are. Nothing can bring poor old John back, and if he was where he’d no business to be — well, literally, that was his funeral.’

‘Do you know of a rogue horse in these parts, Paddy?’

‘Maybe I do, and maybe I don’t. Brer Rabbit is my middle name when it comes to saying nothing.’

‘Give me a hint, Paddy! You see, I don’t believe it was John’s own fault he was killed.’

‘Here! What are you getting at? Do you know what you’re saying?’

‘I’m not saying anything,’ Laura replied with spirit, ‘except this: nothing is going to make me believe that Percheron savaged John Mapsted.’

‘But the kick on the head?’

‘Some other horse did it, I tell you — that is, if it was done by a horse at all!’

‘Look here,’ said Donegal impressively, ‘you keep your fingers out of this particular pie. You’ll be getting yourself into trouble if you go spreading rumours, you know.’

‘I have no intention of spreading rumours, but, if you know of a vicious horse in these parts, I think you ought to tell me.’

‘There isn’t one. Now, then, will that content you? There’s just one hint I can give you and perhaps it’ll convince you that it’s better for you not to get yourself involved in Mapsted’s affairs. He’s been taking some chances in connection with those three racehorses of his, Criollo, Appaloosa and Tennessee. He’s not a licensed trainer, and, apart from that, some of his transactions have been rather fishy. You take my advice and steer clear of anything to do with Mapsted.’

‘I don’t need advice. What I need from you is your opinion of Jenkinson. Now, he is fishy, if you like!’

‘Like master like man, then. I wouldn’t put very much past him, but you

surely don't connect him with Mapsted's death?'

'No, of course not. We've only his word for it that there was blood on the stable floor and on Percheron's hoof, though.'

Diana Donegal came in at that moment and, after a few minutes' general conversation, Laura took her leave. As Paddy and old Matt watched her ride away, the groom said, 'Women! Natural born interferers is women. Why can't her leave well alone?'

'What are you talking about?' demanded Paddy.

'Same as you talked about to her, Master Paddy. I be talking of John Mapsted's death.'

'The devil you are! What do you know about it, anyway?'

'Only as nought but a savage stallion, or else a mare that had madness in her, would have served John Mapsted like that there. Now, what I says is, Percheron is a biter, and a nasty kind of feller at times, too; but he enna a stallion and he enna a broody old mare. That be what I knows about it and everybody round here as can tell a skewbald from a piebald be saying the same. I reckon old Jenkinson could say a goodish bit if he liked.'

'You crept up and listened under the window, you old—'

'Why not, Master Paddy? Mrs Gavin, her have a nice, clear carrying sort of a voice, and I got my hearing, same as I had when I was a youngster, so I can't help what I hears.'

'Well, for goodness' sake keep your mouth shut. Mrs Gavin is talking through her hat, as usual, and we don't want a lot of rubbish going the round of the neighbourhood. Mind what I say, now, and don't you let her pump you about Mapsted's affairs.'

'All right! All right,' grumbled the old man. 'I can keep my mouth shut when I warnts to.'

'Well, mind you *do* want to. And keep an eye on that new mare. She's nervous and she's inclined to break out after exercise.'

True enough, sir. I went back to her yesterday after Mrs Major had had her out, and she was all of a black sweat. I stripped off her rugs and rubbed her down well and pulled her ears to quieten her...'

'You put the rugs back again on her, I hope?'

'I been looking after horses nigh on fifty years, Master Paddy, so you don't require to teach me my business.'

'All right. But keep your trap shut.'

Laura decided that she and Mustang had had enough for one day. She rode

him slowly, dismounted half a mile from home, and after she reached the stables she groomed him herself when he had had his feed. She then went home to a very late lunch, a crime for which anybody but Laura would have incurred the cold displeasure of Henri, Dame Beatrice Bradley's French cook. With him, however, Laura was so firm a favourite that he did nothing but emit sounds of Gallic distress at the thought of how hungry she must be, and set to work immediately to reprieve her from death by starvation.

'Sound!' said Laura, regarding her plate with satisfaction. 'Very sound indeed. Congratulations, Henri, and sober, prayerful thanks. And now, I feel orphaned. What's happened to the D.B.E.?'

'Madame went to Seahampton, Mademoiselle—pardon me—Madame.'

'Oh, so she's really made up her mind to open that new Grammar School, has she?'

'I cannot say, Madame. Madame had lunch at half-past twelve, a barbarous hour, and called for Georges to bring round the car. She did not know at what hour to expect you, she said, so that the early lunch would put out nobody.'

'I see. Henri, don't go. Tell me all about John Mapsted. You must have heard some gossip.'

Henri shrugged.

'But what is there to tell, Madame? He was a gentleman amiable and well-loved.'

'You really think so? My own opinion is that somebody didn't love him very much. At any rate, somebody's horse didn't.'

'Georges, Madame, says that Monsieur Mapsted was murdered.'

'Does he, by Jove? What has he got to go on?'

'He says that Monsieur Mapsted was not the man to get on the wrong side of a horse. To me, the idiom is without meaning. What is it, to say that one mounts not from the wrong side of the horse?'

'He means that John Mapsted was a friend to horses, so that a horse would not be likely to savage him and kill him. Good for George! He's got sense. But has he anything to back up his ideas, I wonder? I'd like to talk to him.'

Henri made no reply, but watched proudly as Laura wolfed the excellent food he had prepared. He took her plate away when she had finished, and produced a rich trifle, her favourite sweet. Having put it before her, he went back to his kitchen to commune with his wife. Laura scooped up great dollops of sherry-soaked sponge-cake topped with jam and cream, and finished the meal with coffee brought in by Célestine. She sat smoking a cigarette and pondering over

her problem in detection until, at four, Dame Beatrice came home.

‘Did you enjoy your ride?’ asked Dame Beatrice.

‘Yes, in a way. But I don’t think I got much farther in the John Mapsted business.’ Laura recounted her conversation with Paddy Donegal. ‘And there’s not much doubt about what Paddy thinks,’ she said in conclusion. ‘What’s more, he didn’t want old Matt, the groom, to overhear what we were saying, and that, I fancy, was because he and Matt had already discussed the thing. The trouble is that although I’m positively certain there’s something to detect, I don’t in the least know how to set about detecting it. There’s only one pointer. I formed the opinion that Paddy knows of somebody in the district who owns a rogue horse. He won’t tell me who it is, though, so I shall simply have to set enquiries afoot and see what comes of them.’

‘I think you had better leave the whole business alone.’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Ring for tea. I had an early lunch.’

Laura rang the bell and waited until Célestine had gone out again before she returned to the subject of Mapsted’s death.

‘I shall go over to Linghurst Parva tomorrow, after I’ve attended the inquest,’ she said, ‘and talk to Merial. She’s always up-to-date with the local gossip. Besides, she has a peculiarly personal interest in John’s death. She was engaged to be married to him, it seems.’

‘Indeed? Then might it not be somewhat tactless — not to say unkind — to discuss his death with her?’

‘Oh, they couldn’t have been *fond* of one another! It was to connect the two stables, I expect. Still, if you think it would be better, I could ride over to Jed Nottingham’s place first and find out what *he* has to say.’

‘I really wish you would not.’

‘Oh, I should only introduce the death as an aside, so to speak. My reason for going to see him would be to ask his advice about partnering Cissie Gauberon.’

‘Nobody in his senses would ever dream that you could contemplate going into partnership with Miss Gauberon.’

‘Well, perhaps you’re right. Certainly Paddy didn’t think I would, but Paddy knows me better than Jed does. I shall be terribly discreet and clever. You needn’t worry.’

‘You will set free a host of rumours.’

‘Perhaps that might be as well. Something useful might come up.’

‘Something unforeseen and dangerous might come up, and I still feel responsible for your health and safety. However, I am not in a position to forbid



you to meddle. If it will satisfy you, I will add that I am thinking of looking into the matter myself if the verdict tomorrow seems a doubtful one. Does that make any difference?’

‘Not noticeably. I’m bored, restless and fighting-fit, I *must* follow my hunch and have a go. Besides, it will look much less suspicious for *me* to haunt riding stables and find out about rogue horses than it would be if *you* did it. Everybody knows you don’t know a snaffle from a bearing-rein!’

‘Very well,’ said Dame Beatrice comfortably. ‘Go over and see Mr Nottingham and Miss Trowse tomorrow, but do be careful not to let loose anything you cannot control. Nobody wants a flood of anonymous letters, and that’s the most likely thing if you start hares in a place like this.’

‘Nobody would think I had any common sense at all, to hear you on the subject!’ said Laura, feeling insulted. Dame Beatrice cackled.

To *change* the subject,’ she said, ‘let me inform you that on Thursday week we are going down to Seahampton to open that new Grammar School. I composed my speech in the car coming home. Perhaps, if I dictate it, you will be good enough to type it for the benefit of the local paper. If I am to be reported at all, I prefer to be reported in English.’

‘Right. Henri said that you went to Seahampton.’

‘Yes.’

To look at the school, I suppose?’

‘I had business in Seahampton, child. George told me that Jenkinson, Mr Mapsted’s groom, has a favourite public house there. I wished to identify it, that is all.’

‘I don’t see why — oh, gossip, you mean? Some clue about John’s death? Did you go inside?’

‘No. Conversation in a public bar is beyond my scope. If the time comes when it seems that such a conversation is essential, George can be trusted to find out for us all that we need to know. In fact, the reason for my staying so long in Seahampton was to give George time to acquaint himself with the amenities offered by the hostelry. He then came on to Old Seahampton and picked me up at the church.’

‘The church?’

‘Certainly. It is of particular interest. Godwin, Earl of Wessex, worshipped in it. The chancel arch is raised on the stones of the original Roman basilica. The chancel itself contains a particularly interesting Easter Sepulchre of the time of Edward I, a Crusader’s chest, and a squint, so that the outlaws of the New Forest

could sneak up and make their devotions.’

‘Didn’t you go to the school, then?’

‘I went as far as the gate. It is an impressive building.’

Laura was far from satisfied.

‘You’re keeping something up your sleeve,’ she said. ‘I feel that your secretary and amanuensis should be taken into your confidence. And talking of that, it appears that there really *is* something rummy about those three horses at the Elkstonehunt stables.’

‘Which three horses, child?’

‘Those I call the mystery horses — Criollo, Tennessee and Appaloosa. Paddy Donegal either knows the secret or guesses it, but he’s being very unhelpful about sharing it. What *did* come out is that he thinks John Mapsted was some sort of crook.’

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### Inquest on a Dead Horseman

*‘... opprest  
To think that now our life is only drest  
For show; mean handy-work of craftsman, cook, or groom!’*  
Wordsworth



THE inquest on John Mapsted was held in the village hall. The Coroner, a local solicitor, sat with a jury of seven, five men and two women, whom he addressed with gloom.

‘Members of the Jury, you are called together to make enquiry into the demise of John Mapsted, who was found dead in a stable on his own premises in the morning of twenty-third February. You have all heard of the unfortunate circumstances and may have formed an opinion as to the cause of death, but you will remember that your verdict is to be strictly in accordance with the evidence which is to be put before you. A brief résumé of the facts is as follows:

‘At approximately seven-fifteen in the morning of February 23, being last Tuesday, John Mapsted, owner and manager of the Elkstonehunt riding stables, was found by his groom, Richard Jenkinson, on the floor of loose-box five. You will hear the evidence of Doctor Rollins, who was called in immediately by Jenkinson. He formed an opinion when he examined the body, and that opinion you will hear in due course. Call Mrs Emily Mapsted.’

Old Mrs Mapsted was called and sworn, and gave evidence of identity.

‘When did you last see your son alive?’

‘On Monday night. I left him reading in the dining-room when I went up to bed.’

‘Is it your custom to retire to bed earlier than your son?’

‘Yes. He stayed up until all hours.’

‘When and where did you next see him, Mrs Mapsted?’

‘On the floor of Percheron’s loose-box at about eight o’clock last Tuesday morning,’ said the old lady in a steady voice. ‘He was dead.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Mapsted. Call Richard Jenkinson.’

Jenkinson, who had cleaned up into a bow-legged crab-apple with white side-whiskers, took the oath in a quavering falsetto which, in Laura's opinion, was put on for the occasion, and then craned forward toward the Coroner as though he was hard of hearing.

'A few questions, Jenkinson.'

'Certainly, your worship.'

'Where were you at approximately a quarter to seven on the morning of Tuesday, February 23?'

'At the door of loose-box five at Elkstonehunt riding stables where I works.'

'What were you doing there?'

'I heared Percheron creating, the nasty creetur, so I goed out to quiet un down.'

'The horse was making a noise?'

'Sounded 'arf orf 'is 'ead, 'e did.'

'And to what did you attribute this when you arrived at the stable door?'

'E'd got Mr Mapsted down and kicked 'is 'ead in, the ugly brute 'ad.'

'I am afraid I cannot allow that statement in evidence. It is a matter of opinion, not of fact, and the jury will disregard it. I must ask the witness to speak only of what he knows, and not of what he surmises, no matter how logical the surmise may be. Now, Jenkinson.'

'The 'orse smelt blood and went crazy with it.'

'What did you do?'

'I run right back to the 'ouse and told Miss Gauberon, her being up and about, and then I rings up Doctor Rollins, though I knew it wasn't no good. Mr Mapsted were dead, no doubt of it. Then I swabs down the loose-box to clean up the blood.'

'Was your master in the habit of visiting the stables at that hour of the morning?'

'No, 'e wasn't, not so early in the year. It were pretty nigh dark in the loose-boxes. I can't think what he were thinking of. I 'ad to light the old stable lantern to see what I were a-doing of. All I can think is—'

'I am afraid we cannot accept your thoughts as evidence. Please do no more than answer my questions. Now, then: can you suggest any reason why Mr Mapsted would be in the stables at that early hour of the day?'

'If a mare was in-foal.'

'But the animal Percheron is not a mare.'

'Course not. He's a gelding.'

‘Quite so. Any other reason?’

‘If a horse was took ill.’

‘Is there any reason to suppose that the horse in question had been taken ill?’

‘No. Just wicked, that’s Percheron.’

‘Has he ever been known to attack people?’

‘Yes. ’E chewed off Mrs Hacker’s topknot one time. Thought it was ’ay, I reckon. Nearly give ’er a nervous breakdown, ’e did. ’Nother time ’e bit Colonel May when ’e went to stroke ’is nose. ’E’s a kicker, too. If ’e was to go out ’unting ’e’d need a capital K ’ung on ’is tail as a warning to give ’im room. Wicious, that’s what ’e is. I was always warning Mister John.’

The Coroner looked at the jury and enquired whether there were any questions. One of the women members rose.

‘The witness said that he had to light the stable lantern in order to see. Would he not have expected it to be already alight if Mr Mapsted had gone to the stables so early in the morning?’

‘Well, Jenkinson?’ said the Coroner. The groom took his time in replying.

‘It’s a good question, that is,’ he said. ‘Yes, that’s an intelligent point. I never thought of that, no more I never.’

‘Answer it, man!’

‘Very good, sir. Yes, now I come to think of it, I *did* ought to have expected to see the lantern alight, but it never occurred to me, you see, as that wicked old devil ’ad savaged Mr John. I just took down the lantern and lit it to see what all the fuss was about.’

‘Had Mr Mapsted a torch?’ enquired the woman juror.

‘Not *on* ’im. I found ’is torch in ’is room, laid out on the bedside table. ’E kep’ it there to see the time by ’is clock, it not bein’ *luminious*, ma’am.’

The Coroner took up the questioning.

‘Thank you, Miss Rye. Now, Jenkinson, if Mr Mapsted had gone out to the stables at that hour, would you not have expected him to take his torch?’

‘I suppose I should, your worship.’

‘There is no need to give me that title. You may stand down now. Call Doctor Rollins.’

Rollins was called and sworn. He agreed to his name and address and to the fact that he was in private practice in Wandles Parva.

‘Now, Doctor,’ went on the Coroner, ‘you were called to the Elkstonehunt riding stables at just before seven on the morning of last Tuesday, February 23?’

‘Yes. I received a telephone message from the last witness.’

‘Will you tell the jury, please, about your visit? They will wish all relevant details.’

‘I was still in bed when the call came through, but I made what haste I could to the Elkstonehunt stables. I was met at the gate to the stables by Richard Jenkinson and he conducted me to number five loose-box. He had provided a stable lantern so that I could examine the interior of the loose-box. John Mapsted was lying across the middle of the floor. He was dead. His skull had been fractured. I don’t know whether you want the scientific anatomical terms?’

‘Now, doctor, in your opinion, was the fractured skull the cause of death?’

‘And shock. I conducted a post-mortem examination later, under better conditions, and there is no doubt in my mind that death had probably followed a short period of unconsciousness, and had taken place some five to seven hours before I was called to the stables.’

There was a considerable stir in the court.

‘In your view, could the fatal injury have been caused by a blow from a horse’s hoof?’

‘Yes, but I couldn’t swear that it *was* so caused, of course.’

‘Thank you, Doctor Rollins. Recall Richard Jenkinson.’

Jenkinson, looking startled, returned to the witness-box.

‘Now, Jenkinson, just one more thing,’ said the Coroner. ‘You have heard Doctor Rollins’ evidence that Mr Mapsted’s death could have been caused by a kick from a horse. Can you tell us anything which might serve to show that the horse in question was — er —’ he referred to his notes — ‘the horse named Percheron?’

‘I can that,’ said Jenkinson. ‘Is left-fore was sticky wi’ blood before I washed it down.’

‘Thank you. That is all. Would any member of the jury like to ask the witness a question before he stands down?’

‘Yes, I ’ud,’ said a farm-hand named Green. ‘I know the horse Percheron and I know his reppitation. Will Dick Jenkinson tell us how it were safe for Doctor Rollins to go into his stable to examine poor Jack as it appear he done?’

‘An excellent point, Mr Green. Well, Jenkinson?’

‘I ’ad the ’orse out of the stable before Doctor Rollins went in. It wouldn’t have bin safe for ’im otherwise. Any fool except Freddie Green ’ud know that.’

‘I also should like to ask a question,’ said another juror. ‘Who else, besides Jenkinson, saw blood on the horse’s forefoot?’

‘Nobody,’ growled the witness. ‘Soon as I’d tied ’im up I ’osed ’is ’oof and

the floor of the stable, too. 'E'd 'ave gorn mad, otherwise, wi' the smell of the blood.'

'Thank you,' said the juror, and Jenkinson stood down. The next witness was the veterinary surgeon, Andrew Scott. After the usual preliminaries the Coroner said:

'You asked to be called. What is it you have to say?'

'Only this, sir. I understand that Mr Mapsted's death took place somewhere around midnight.'

'That is so.'

'Well, in my experience — and I've been in my profession fifteen years — if a horse is going to make a noise, squealing and so on, while he's savaging a man, he makes the noise at the time he's doing the job. He doesn't wait for several hours and *then* put on a fit of hysterics.'

'And what conclusion are we expected to draw from your remarks, Mr Scott?'

'Either that Doctor Rollins misread the signs of the time of death,' said Scott bluntly, 'which I don't for a moment believe, or else there's some mystery here which I think we ought to fathom.'

'Mystery?' said the Coroner. 'When a man is found kicked on the head, and is lying dead in the stable of a notably savage horse, I don't see much mystery, Mr Scott.'

'I should like to ask the witness a question,' put in Miss Rye. 'Mr Scott, you have told us that you have had fifteen years' experience in your profession. How many times have you known a horse to savage its owner?'

'Once only, madam.'

'Will you tell us the circumstances?'

'The man was a brute, and the horse turned berserk on him.'

'Was John Mapsted brutal to his horses?'

'On the contrary. He was one of the best fellows with horses I've ever known.'

'Nevertheless,' said the Coroner, 'you would agree, I take it, that horses, like human beings, do unaccountable things at times?'

'They are much less likely to do unaccountable things than human beings, sir, in my experience.'

'But Percheron was known to have been a savage horse. It is common knowledge in the neighbourhood, I believe.'

'I don't agree he was a savage horse, sir. That is an exaggeration. I would

call him a naughty horse. Actually, I suspect him of having a sense of humour. I believe he gets a kick out of frightening people.'

'A kick seems to be the *mot juste*,' commented the Coroner acidly. 'Call Cecile Gauberon.'

Cissie, trim in a black costume which somehow indicated the French nationality which, up to this time, had barely been suspected by the village, tripped cosily into the witness-box and took the oath in a tragic and theatrical voice.

'Now, Miss — er — Mademoiselle Gauberon,' began the Coroner.

'Miss, please.'

'Very well. You were John Mapsted's business partner, I believe?'

'Yes. We were partners for seven years.'

'You have heard the witnesses Jenkinson and Scott, and you have also heard Doctor Rollins. Can you suggest any reason why John Mapsted should have gone to Percheron's loose-box at about midnight last Monday-Tuesday?'

'I don't think he did,' said Cissie Gauberon with the calmness of a woman who is about to create a sensation.

'But, Miss Gauberon, you have Doctor Rollins' professional opinion that death took place at about midnight.'

'I don't doubt that it did. What I doubt is whether it took place in Percheron's stable, or, in fact, at Elkstonehunt at all.'

'Now, *really*, Miss Gauberon!'

'Well, I'm sorry if I seem to be throwing a spanner into the works,' said Cissie blithely, 'but considering that at ten o'clock on Monday night John spoke to me on the telephone from Seahampton, you'll see why I'm a bit doubtful about this Percheron business, especially as I don't believe for a moment that the horse would savage anybody.'

'Percheron is a valuable horse, I believe?'

'It depends on what you call valuable. He *could* be, I suppose, if he'd run a bit faster, but that's past praying for.'

'I was not referring to his speed. I refer to the fact that if it is proved he killed John Mapsted you would be morally bound to part with him — in fact, to have him shot.'

'It won't be proved he killed John,' said Cissie Gauberon, flatly. 'The people who know the horse know to the contrary. If John was killed by a horse, that horse wasn't Percheron.'

'You are naturally prejudiced, Miss Gauberon. The jury believe that you



mean what you say. They also believe that you are mistaken. What happened seems quite clear. You say that John Mapsted telephoned you at ten o'clock from Seahampton, but Seahampton is not so far away that he could not have reached the Elkstonehunt stables between eleven o'clock and one, surely?'

'But the message was to say that he wouldn't be back until Thursday, and to remind me to get the vet — that's Andrew Scott there — to have a look at Viatka, who'd got a nasty kick that he couldn't account for.'

'He could have changed his mind about coming back, I presume? And his mother, Mrs Emily Mapsted, said nothing in her evidence of his having been absent from home on the night in question.'

'You'd better recall her, then.'

'Well,' said the Coroner, 'it does need a little explanation, this Seahampton business, for the groom, Richard Jenkinson, did not mention it either.'

'It *could* be he didn't know.'

'But Mrs Mapsted, you think, *did* know?'

'I couldn't say, I'm sure.'

Recalled, old Mrs Mapsted adhered firmly to her previous statements.

'I went to bed at my usual time, nine-thirty,' she said, 'leaving my son downstairs. If he went out after that, I know nothing of it.'

The jury retired for five minutes and returned a majority verdict of Death by Misadventure.

'And,' said the foreman, 'us would like to put on to that as four on us don't believe it was Percherong, sir.'

'You cannot put such an opinion forward,' said the Coroner.

'Us 'ud like to add,' said the unabashed farmer, 'as how we'm puzzled, like, about the disagreement, so to say, atween young Cissie Gauberon and old Mrs Mapsted as to where Jack Mapsted got himself to last Tuesday night.'

'I shall put down your verdict and nothing else,' said the Coroner sternly, 'and I may add, for your information, that I concur in it. One of the two witnesses you name must be mistaken. Ladies are notorious, I believe—' he smiled acidly — 'for having very little sense of time.'

'*Well!*' said Laura Gavin to Dame Beatrice when they were in the open air again. 'What on earth made Cissie Gauberon tell those lies!'

A figure familiar to both joined them.

'Interesting little murder-case,' said Detective Chief-Inspector Robert Gavin.

'What on earth are *you* doing here?' demanded his wife. 'I thought you were on that Teddy-boy business in—'

‘Cleared up, I’m glad to say. The chap didn’t die, fortunately for those miserable little thugs, but they’ve got theirs! I’ve only popped down for the day, though. Got to get back tonight.’

‘Did *you* tip him off about our inquest?’ demanded Laura of Dame Beatrice.

‘I thought it might interest him.’

‘It did,’ said Gavin with emphasis. ‘You saw the body, I believe, Dame B?’

‘Yes, I saw it.’

‘What did you think?’

‘It *could* have been a kick from a horse.’

‘Or it could have been our old pal, the blunt instrument?’

‘There was nothing to show which it was.’

‘I still want to know why Cissie Gauberon lied,’ said Laura.

‘For the best of reasons, if she did,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Maybe Miss Gauberon, like you, and like our dear Robert here, strongly feels that the death was no accident; therefore perhaps she has done what she can to make certain that the police, whose olfactory organs function well when the odour of rodent is in the least perceptible, will at least undertake a watching brief in the affair.’

‘Why do you think it was the *young* woman who was lying?’ demanded Gavin. ‘Why shouldn’t it have been the old mother?’

‘Just a hunch,’ said his wife airily. ‘I don’t think old Mrs Mapsted *would* lie, especially on oath, whereas Cissie, who’s done a bit of horse-dealing in her time, has about as much respect for the truth as a professional witness in the Orient.’

‘I think the two of them may be in collusion,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Flatly contradictory evidence, such as they gave, was very likely a mutual arrangement, I would say. But, of course, the main point is that Miss Gauberon doesn’t want Percheron shot.’

‘Good Lord!’ said Gavin. ‘You do see life in rural Hampshire! Well, this is where I put you into your limousine while I myself roll away in the direction of the Forest Pony. I want my lunch. All this “old swearing” has created a vacuum in my interior, and it is well known that nature, especially male human nature, abhors a vacuum.’

‘Oh, they do an awful lunch at the Forest Pony,’ said Laura. ‘Can’t you come to lunch with *us*?’

‘I shall be mortally offended if he does not,’ said her employer, ‘and Henri would never forgive me. He has for our dear Robert a passionate admiration. He dotes on his figure, his clothes, his prowess as an officer of the law, his brains, his charm and uncanny fluency in the Gallic tongue; and Célestine has been in

love with him for years.'

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### Stable Talk

*'To Ditto ½ years Horse Tax pd 0.10.0. I pay for 1 Male  
Servant 2 Female Servants and for 2 Horses. For every Male  
Servant per Annum 2.10.0. For every Female Servant per  
Annum 0.10.0. For every Horse, for riding per Annum 0.10.0.'*  
Parson Woodforde



L AURA, undeterred by Dame Beatrice's broad hints that she would do far more harm than good by interfering in matters which would only become a source of village gossip, or worse, if she persisted, rode over to Hurst St. Johns on the following day to talk to Merial Trowse.

She found the proprietress of the riding school there dosing a seedy-looking mare, and stood by sympathetically while this was accomplished.

'Poor old Susan,' said Miss Trowse. 'Pump for me, would you?' She rinsed her mannish-looking hands under the icy water which Laura obligingly drew for her, and added, as she dried them on the coarse apron she was wearing over her breeches, 'I suppose you don't want a job as unpaid stable-boy?'

'I shouldn't mind if you lived a bit nearer,' Laura replied. She did not like Merial Trowse, but she knew that she was extremely poor and probably partially starved herself in order to feed her horses. 'But, as a matter of fact, I didn't come over on horse-business exactly. At least, I did, and yet not, if you take me.'

'Can't say I do, Mrs Gav. Come again.'

'I went to the inquest yesterday. It was all of a queer do. I can't get John out of my mind.'

'Oh?' said Merial, giving Laura a sharp glance out of eyes like two grey marbles. 'That's funny, because I can't, either. Something very fishy there, Mrs Gav.'

'I'm glad you think so. What can we do about it?'

'Do? Can't do anything. What would there be to do?'

'Find his murderer,' said Laura boldly. 'You know more about the

neighbourhood than I do. Is there a horse — not Percheron — anywhere around here capable of savaging a man as John was savaged?’

‘Oh, a *horse!*’ said Merial, in a tone of great relief. ‘I thought for a minute that you meant a *real* murderer. Yes, there’s that stallion over at Grinsted’s farm. He’d eat a rhinoceros if he could get at one. Grinsted’s getting rid of him, I think.’

‘But what would John have been doing at Grinsted’s farm to be killed by the stallion?’

‘That’s what *I’d* like to know,’ said Merial, gritting her teeth, which were almost as large as those of the mare she had been dosing. ‘You knew that John and I were thinking of teaming-up, I suppose?’

‘I heard something,’ said Laura, suddenly embarrassed. ‘I say, I’m awfully sorry. I shouldn’t have — I shouldn’t have—’

‘Talked about him and murder? Why not?’ asked Merial. ‘I wasn’t thinking of *marrying* him, if that’s what you understood when I talked of teaming-up. It was to be a business partnership. I was going to sell up here and take my nags over to his place. He’s got — he had — a better business head than mine will ever be; on the other hand, I’ve a better hand with the gees.’

‘I see,’ said Laura. ‘You don’t suppose — I mean, is there any reason to think that somebody didn’t want that partnership to materialize?’

‘So you *did* mean a real murderer,’ said Merial. ‘Yes, there is one person — I’ll leave you to guess who — who certainly wouldn’t have been very pleased.’

‘I see,’ said Laura. ‘All your string out except Susan?’ she added, in an off-hand tone. She wanted time to think.

‘All my string!’ Merial Trowse snorted with laughter. ‘All my string nowadays consists of six old cart-horse types dignified by the name of hacks. I tell you I’m on the rocks. I’ll *have* to sell up and clear out soon. I’m going to be kennel-maid to those new Boxer-dog people on the other side of Ferndown.’

‘Kennel-maid?’ Laura looked suitably horrified.

‘More. I’m booked at Easter for an equestrian act with Sachem’s, the big-top place just outside Seahampton. Know it? *You* know — all the fun of the fair, with a circus thrown in.’

‘Good Lord!’

‘I know. But what can I do? All my life I’ve been with horses. Dogs’ll be a change, that’s one thing, but I can’t live with *nothing* but dogs.’

‘How old are you?’ enquired Laura, deeming this a question to be put as bluntly as possible in order to make it inoffensive.

‘I know,’ said Merial again. ‘I’m forty-two. Still, I’ve kept my figure pretty well, and I’m going to wear breeches and boots. No tights and spangles, thank you. I’ve insisted on that. You wouldn’t like to help me finish mucking-out, I suppose, while you’re here? I can lend you some jeans.’

Laura, good-natured ‘in spots,’ as she herself expressed it, was so desirous of continuing what seemed to be a promising conversation that she agreed at once, and went indoors with Merial to change breeches and boots for the jeans. She took off her hacking jacket, too, and reappeared prepared for the work. Nothing would have induced Laura to lift a finger to perform any ordinary household task — a point which she had explained clearly to Detective Chief-Inspector Gavin before she married him, but cleaning out stables and pigsties came under no ban where she was concerned. She would likewise hew wood and draw water, take a bicycle to pieces, knock a handy nail or two into a piece of wood, remove or put in screws correctly and competently — all, in her view, activities not prejudicial to human dignity; but the usual domestic work of women she held to be beneath contempt, an attitude which had freed her in her youth from several detestable chores.

‘Thanks a lot. You’re a sport,’ said Merial, when the task was concluded. ‘They’ll be coming back soon. What about a drink?’

They went into the house after taking turns under a pump whose bitter cold water made even the hardened Laura flinch. Then Merial, whose extreme poverty never prevented her from keeping rum in the house, produced a squat bottle, a jug of water and a half-empty bottle of orangeade.

‘I shall go over to Grinsted’s,’ said Laura, presently. ‘I’d like to make the acquaintance of that stallion. Not that I really think...’ She took a refreshing gulp of the mixture in her glass, and did not finish the sentence.

‘Jed Nottingham might be able to help you there,’ said Merial, gently swigging her glass as she studied the liquid in it. ‘Why don’t you try him first? Ask him whether Cissie Gauberon is fixed up yet.’

‘Cissie?’

‘She’s supposed to be riding in a point-to-point for him.’

‘Oh, is she? Many thanks. Yes, I ought to be able to work the conversation round from there, I should think.’ She finished her drink. ‘Well, thanks for the snort. I’d better be off. I’ll let you know how I get on.’

‘Don’t ride for a fall,’ said Merial. ‘Don’t forget the Coroner thinks it was accidental death, and that it might be as well to leave it at that, don’t you know. Personally, that Jenkinson could do with a bit of watching. He’s the one who saw

the blood on Percheron's hoof.'

'A point which had not escaped me,' said Laura crisply. 'What the soldier said isn't evidence.'

'You're telling me,' said Merial, with a very grim smile.

'I appear to have misjudged Merial Trowse,' said Laura to Dame Beatrice at tea-time. 'She doesn't seem such a bad sort, after all. Are you satisfied with your speech for the Boatmen's Institute — I mean the Seahampton Grammar School?'

'As I have no idea who will be listening to me, I find that question impossible to answer. The only thing I can say about the speech is that it is calculated to offend nobody, as it contains two or three alternatives to every compliment, every homily and every joke, according to audience-reaction.'

'Very painstaking,' said Laura approvingly. 'When do you want to try it on the dog?'

'Whenever your detective fever abates, child, and you feel able to give it your undivided attention.'

'You'd better do it before dinner, then, I think. I want to ride over to Jed Nottingham's tomorrow morning, and then, if there's time, I'd like to visit Grinsted's farm. There's a horse there which Merial Trowse indicates pretty roundly could be a killer. Decent of her to mention it.'

'Beware of the Greeks when they come bearing gifts.'

'It wasn't a gift. I helped her to muck-out her stables — an onerous task which doesn't get done as often as it should, in my opinion, and one which, but for my timely presence, would not have been attempted today. Of course, she's dreadfully short-handed. She was there on her own, so I suppose young Sally Pearce had gone out with the string. A middle-aged woman and a girl of sixteen aren't enough to manage those stables. Anyway, it seems that among the people who might conceivably have wished John out of the way, Merial can scarcely be numbered.'

'*Were* they thinking of marrying one another?'

'She says not. A business partnership only, according to her. But that makes my argument all the stronger. You don't do in a prospective business partner. You wait until he pinches the takings or double-crosses you over a deal.' With this Sybelline utterance she went out.

She left immediately after breakfast next morning. To get to the Elkstonehunt stables she had to walk along a country road and through the village, and would have enjoyed the walk but for the fact that she was taking it in breeches, boots, a black jacket of impeccable cut, a stock and a bowler, for she had decided to

tackle Jed Nottingham in full war-paint.

Cissie Gauberon was superintending the mounting and deportment of her riding class. This consisted of three young children. Ursula, Dick and Sarah May, grandchildren of Colonel May of the manor house. Their governess, Miss Temme, was with them. Nobody was mounted when Laura arrived, and deportment was notably at a discount. Miss Temme was shouting; Sarah, aged six, was crying with temper; Dick, aged eight, was cutting at the fence of the paddock with his riding gloves; and Ursula, aged ten, eldest of the trio, was sulking visibly.

‘I tell you, Ursula!’ bellowed Miss Temme. ‘It *is* Dick’s turn to ride Shan. Now, Sarah,’ she continued, modulating her strident tones to Bottom’s probable conception of those of a cooing dove, ‘you know you love Connemara, so don’t be a naughty little girl.’ She switched on the volume again. ‘And you, Dick, stop spoiling your gloves on that fence. Miss Gauberon doesn’t put up fences for you to hit them and spoil your nice gloves, do you, Miss Gauberon?’

Miss Gauberon knew better, from long experience, than to join in an argument in which one of the protagonists was a May child. She whistled between her teeth and adjusted the girths of Miss Temme’s own steed and pretended that she had not heard her name.

‘Miss Gauberon lets me call her Cissie,’ said Ursula, stamping both feet. ‘So I *can* ride Shan! I can ride him whenever I want to. He’s nearly a horse, and I’m too *big* to ride Basuto! I look simply just *silly* on him! I shall ride Shan or else I’ll show you!’

‘Well, show us,’ said Laura, strolling up. ‘But be quick about it. Here, up with you on Palomino and jump a couple of fences. That’s show everybody.’

‘I can ride Palomino. I can ride anything on four legs,’ said Dick, turning round. ‘Let *me* ride Palomino!’

‘Ridiculous!’ shouted Miss Temme, glowering at the peacemaker. ‘Palomino is *my* horse.’

‘You’re too heavy-handed for him. Mr Mapsted said so, and now he’s dead you can’t contradict him,’ said Dick.

‘You have to respect the dead,’ said Ursula, joining forces with her brother because of his promising gambit.

‘Nonsense!’ shouted Miss Temme, to the horrified delight of both children.

‘Miss *Temme*!’ shouted Dick, shocked. ‘That’s almost *swearing*.’

‘The dead aren’t nonsense. They’re in heaven,’ said Ursula, in sickeningly reproachful tones.



‘Now look what you’ve done!’ said Miss Temme, turning angrily on Laura.

‘Anything for a quiet life,’ said Laura. ‘Come on, Ursula. Come and help me saddle up, and I’ll let you have a canter round the paddock on Mustang.’

They went off to the loose-boxes together. Cissie Gauberon hastily mounted the rest of the clan and when Ursula returned, leading Mustang, the party were moving off.

‘I can easily catch them up,’ said Ursula. ‘Mustang is rather high in the leg, isn’t he?’

‘Up with you,’ said Laura briskly. The child mounted readily and with almost no help. She was a thin-faced, straight-haired little girl, unattractive and bad-tempered where most of her acquaintances were concerned, but on horseback she became a different being. ‘Um!’ said Laura, when the child at last drew rein. ‘Not bad at all. Off you get, and mount Basuto, and if you’ll not bleat at Dick when we catch up with the others, I’ll let you gallop.’

‘Oh, I’ve galloped before!’ retorted Ursula. ‘It’s no treat to me.’

‘Good-oh,’ said Laura unconcernedly. ‘Come on, then.’

‘I could tell you something if I liked,’ said Ursula, pausing with her hand on her pony’s neck before she mounted.

‘Say on.’ Laura mounted Mustang, who shook his head as he felt the familiar pressure of her knees. He began to move forward. Ursula mounted Basuto.

‘Swear double cross-my-heart you won’t tell anybody else, then,’ she said.

‘Can’t.’

‘You can. It’s quite easy. Look, you—’

‘I don’t mean I don’t know how to do it. I mean I can’t make a promise like that.’

‘Miss Temme does — but she never keeps her word, so I suppose it’s the same thing.’

‘It’s not the same thing at all, you muddle-headed little sea-serpent!’

Ursula giggled.

‘I wish *you* were our governess,’ she said, ‘instead of Miss Temme.’

‘You wouldn’t wish it for long.’

‘Oh, we should behave ourselves decently with *you*, Laura.’

‘You certainly would, but I couldn’t be bothered.’

‘Don’t you want to hear what I can tell you?’

‘I don’t suppose it matters whether I want to hear it or not. You can make up your mind whether or not you want to tell me. And don’t keep bothering. I want to think. Come on! Let’s canter and catch up the others, then you can talk to

*them.*'

'Oh, but, Laura, I *do* want to tell you. I'll have to whisper, though, because, if anybody knew I knew what I do know, I might get killed.'

Laura reined in.

'Oh, well,' she said resignedly, 'get it off your sickening chest, then.'

The horse and the pony stood.

'I heard somebody threaten Mr Mapsted, and now he's dead. Don't you think that's *rather queer*, Laura?'

'Good gracious, no! Does your vocabulary include the word "coincidence," by any chance?'

'Yes. It was a coincidence when Grandpapa and Major Bangor both wanted to buy the same dining-table at Mr Gantry's sale, and there *temper* when Major Bangor got it!'

'Not sure that expresses it. Never mind. Let it go. What *was* this horrible threat? And how did you come to overhear it, you little snooper?'

'I wasn't snooping. Really I wasn't. I was hiding in Connemara's loose-box because Miss Temme was going to complain about me and I wanted her to think I had run away. I heard a man say "You'd better watch your step, Mapsted. Your line of country is getting a bit unhealthy, you know." Then Mr Mapsted said, "So what?" And the man said, "So nothing, but you'd better see you have another think coming. I'm warning you for your own good." And Mr Mapsted said, "Thanks a lot, and now get out before I kick you out." '

'Did you see the man?'

'Yes. I was ever so interested. You don't often have the chance to see two grown-ups getting mad at one another.'

'The man wasn't anybody you knew?'

'Well, I *think* I've seen him before, but I can't remember where. He was rather a tall man and looked spivvy.'

'Clean-shaven?'

'Well, he didn't have a moustache or whiskers, but he *could* have done with a shave!'

'I see. You'd recognize him if you spotted him again, I suppose?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Well, remember to keep all this strictly under your jockey-cap, and if you do see the man again, let me know and I'll tell my policeman husband to get on his track.'

'Then I could say I was working in with the Yard! Oh, Laura, *thank* you!'

‘A pleasure. Hullo, I see that Miss Temme and party are coming back to look for you. Good-bye, and, don’t forget, mum’s the word.’

Laura rode thoughtfully over to Linghurst Parva to talk to Jed Nottingham. Jed, a coarse-looking young man in a disreputable pair of breeches, football stockings, suede shoes and a very dirty polo-necked sweater, was exchanging banter with a couple of young women in riding kit. He cocked an impudent eye upon Laura’s faultless clothes, and said:

‘Hullo, Mrs Gavin. How’s tricks?’

‘All right,’ Laura replied.

‘Meet Miss Longton and Mrs Gapp, Mrs Gavin.’

‘How do you do? How do you do?’ said Laura. The young women respectively replied:

‘Fine, thanks,’ and ‘Pleased to meet you.’

‘Miss Longton and Mrs Gapp are down from London for a week or two to learn to ride. They’s in a film,’ explained Jed. ‘Anything special I can do for you, Mrs Gavin?’

‘Yes. I want some advice. You know Cissie Gauberon?’

‘Who doesn’t?’

‘She’s offered me a partnership. John Mapsted’s place, you know.’

‘Take it. Cissie’s all right. It was poor old J. who mis-managed that show. How much does she want?’

‘I don’t know. Merial Trowse doesn’t think much of the idea.’

‘No initiative.’ Jed took a battered packet of cigarettes from his breeches pocket, selected one and lit it by striking a match on the sole of his shoe. He was returning the packet to his pocket when he affected to withdraw it again as he said, ‘Oh, sorry, girls. Anybody else like a fag? No? Good-oh. Yes, Mrs Gavin. You cut yourself in with Cissie. Is she going to get rid of that brute that did for poor old John?’

‘I’ve no idea. I should hardly think so. Percheron is a valuable horse. He isn’t really vicious. Something must have frightened him that night.’ When Jed was among her audience Laura usually proffered something less than her full opinion.

‘Somebody tried to nobble him is my theory. Thought of that?’

‘No.’ Laura affected surprise. ‘No, I hadn’t. Why should anybody want to?’

‘Point-to-point next week. Prize of fifty pounds. Old John bound to win it as long as Percheron didn’t fool about.’

‘But — fifty pounds? It isn’t enough to be worth the risk of killing

somebody, surely?’

‘Maybe not to you, but I heard that Merial Trowse will have to close down if she doesn’t get a break soon. It isn’t only the fifty. The horse that wins should fetch a pretty good price. If Merial could collect the fifty and sell the winner — supposing that to be her mare Topsy, you know — she could see her way clear for a bit longer, maybe. Maybe?’

‘I think that’s a pretty dud suggestion,’ said Laura coldly. ‘And you’ve nothing to base it on at all.’

‘No?’ said Jed casually. ‘Have it your own way, Mrs Gavin, I don’t mind. I thought you’d like to know which way the cat jumped, that’s all, and Merial Trowse is near the end of her tether.’

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## CHAPTER SIX

### Too Many Cats

*‘She did wish to learn, and she did learn. You shall learn tomorrow what she learnt. Meanwhile of course the prospect struck her as slightly grim.’*

Henry James



‘**T**OO many cats jumping, by the sound of it,’ said Laura to herself when she had remounted and was riding over to Grinsted’s farm. ‘There’s the unknown man who threatened John. Wonder how reliable that ghastly little kid is as a witness? I’d better tackle Cissie Gauberon. If the man came to see John, Cissie probably knew about it. Then there’s this rotten idea of Jed Nottingham’s — and he is a rotter, if ever I met one — and then there’s the possibility of this stallion I’m going to interview. And maybe none of these particular cats will jump at all. Then, of course, there’s always Cissie herself to be considered. Suppose she didn’t want John to team up with Merial? Ah, but in that case she’d have gone for Merial, not John, unless — oh, *I don’t know!* Now, what am I going to say at Grinsted’s?’

The farm was only about a mile-and-a-half from Jed Nottingham’s stables. She got there to find the farmyard entrance completely blocked by a broken-down lorry full of bricks. A couple of sweating, blaspheming men had just begun to unload the bricks, and Grinsted, the farmer, stood watching them with a hint of irony about the twist of his bad-tempered, domineering mouth. He had a wooden mallet in his hand — a new one, Laura observed. Before he noticed her he had swung it twice at the leaning gatepost without taking his eyes off the carters. The lorry had apparently caught the gate-post as it turned in.

‘Good day, Mr Grinsted,’ she said. ‘Have you got the vet. here still?’

Grinsted raised his eyes at the sound of her voice. They were remarkable eyes, large, mournful, and of a peculiar cloudy blue; the eyes of a mystic, Laura always thought. Dame Beatrice, however, had once likened them to those of a sex maniac she had had under her care at her London clinic.

‘The vet?’ Grinsted let his remarkable eyes rove over Laura’s spick-and-span riding boots and then over the points of her horse. ‘I haven’t got the vet. here, Mrs Gavin. No.’

‘Oh, dear! I’ve just come over from Jed Nottingham’s, and I understood you had Andrew Scott here to look at that stallion of yours.’

‘Iceland Blue? God bless you, Mrs Gavin, the horse is as pretty as pretty! I heard you were thinking of going into partnership with Miss Gauberon now poor old John Mapsted is...’ He made a gesture and turned a black-nailed thumb towards the ground.

‘Rumour travels fast,’ said Laura. ‘The point certainly has arisen, but I don’t know that I’m thinking of accepting the offer. What happened here?’ She slanted her whip at the lorry.

‘Search me, *I* don’t know. When they’ve cleared the load, I’ll help ’em push the lorry clear of the gates, but they’ll have to man-handle the bricks to where I want ’em. It wasn’t my fault they broke down the gate-post, was it?’

‘Oh? Are you going into the building trade for a change?’

‘New Piggeries.’

‘Really? Very interesting. I’ve rather an affection for pigs.’

‘Meaning you’d like to see mine?’

‘Very much, if it isn’t putting you about.’

‘Not at all, if you can wait until we’ve got this mess shifted. Tell you what. Have a ride round and get back here in half an hour. How would that suit?’

‘Admirably,’ said Laura. She brought Mustang round and walked him until they came to a patch of common. Here they trotted and cantered, then Laura dismounted and led the horse. At the end of thirty-five minutes by her half-hunter — a wedding present from her husband — she was back at the farmyard gates. Not only the load of bricks but the lorry itself had disappeared. She rode round to the back of the Tudor farmhouse and discovered Grinsted seated on a pile of the bricks beside a deserted pig-sty.

‘Here I am, Mr Grinsted,’ she said. ‘What sort of pigs do you keep?’

‘Hampshire hogs,’ said Grinsted with a slow and crafty smile. ‘No, as a matter of fact, Mrs Gavin, I keep Large Whites and Berkshires mostly. Come on and have a look.’

Laura duly admired the pigs, about which, thanks to the fact that Dame Beatrice Bradley’s nephew, Carey Lestrangle, kept a large, up-to-date and flourishing pig-farm in Oxfordshire, she could talk knowledgeably, and then she said:

‘What did you say your stallion’s name was?’

‘Him? Iceland Blue. He’s a real beauty.’

‘I’d love to see him. Is he temperamental?’

‘Him? Gentle as a lamb. A child could lead him about. He’s pure-bred. That accounts for his gentlemanly manners.’

‘I’d love to see him,’ Laura repeated warmly.

Grinsted shook his head. His melancholy eyes met hers.

‘Not today, Mr Gavin. I haven’t got him here today. No. Over on the other side of the Forest is Iceland Blue. Yes. Doing his bit to continue the breed, Mrs Gavin. Ah, a nice little nest-egg is that horse laying for me these days. Ah, well, now! A pity you’ve got to be disappointed, but there it is. The pigs ’ull have to do for today.’

‘Oh, well, some other time, perhaps,’ said Laura, offhandedly. ‘What did you think when you heard about poor John Mapsted?’

‘I read a story once about poor John Straker, Mrs Gavin.’ His deceiving eyes met hers again.

‘Good heavens!’ cried Laura, considerably startled by this reference. ‘John Mapsted would never have tried to lame Percheron!’

‘Can you be sure of that, Mrs Gavin. Percheron was entered for the point-to-point and the fifty-pound prize, wasn’t he? Ah, and but for Ancreon, that’s owned, as *you* know, by a Lymington syndicate, Percheron, if he ran, would be bound to win.’

‘Percheron could beat Ancreon,’ said Laura. ‘In fact, he did, last year, and that’s why John Mapsted bought him.’

‘True for you, Mrs Gavin. Would it surprise you to know that John Mapsted had two hundred pounds on Ancreon to win the point-to-point?’

‘It certainly would! I don’t believe it! Why should he bet against his own horse? And, anyway, I don’t believe he could risk two hundred pounds. I don’t believe he’d got it.’

‘He was putting the money on a certainty, Mrs Gavin, so long as Percheron was out of the race. You see, Mrs Gavin, there’s one funny thing about Percheron. You can’t pull him. When he races he runs as he likes and you can’t hold him. He’s a mad horse. So, knowing he couldn’t pull him in the race, John Mapsted decided to hamstring him, see, Mrs Gavin? And so came to his end, as you could not blame the horse, could you?’

‘Rot!’ said Laura flatly. ‘And you shouldn’t malign the dead.’

‘Malign, Mrs Gavin? Oh, no. It is what I should have done myself if

Percheron had been my own.'

'But,' objected Laura, abandoning ethics in favour of common sense, 'why on earth *shouldn't* Percheron win? If John had two hundred pounds to spare, why shouldn't he have backed his own horse?'

'Not enough profit, you see, Mrs Gavin. Not a good price. No. Last year's winner, and known to the whole Forest as being better than ever. Quoted at evens in our little country flutters, Mrs Gavin. What's the good of evens? No punter in his senses would look at evens when he could get a very nice seven to two on Ancreon. Don't you see?'

Laura rode back to the Stone House very slowly.

'I still don't believe it,' she said to Dame Beatrice at dinner.

'Don't believe what, my dear Laura?'

Laura recounted her adventures.

'What's more,' she said firmly, 'I don't believe Grinsted *had* sent that stallion away. He's got him hidden somewhere. *That's* the horse that killed John Mapsted, if any horse killed him at all! Oh, and another thing! It was weird about Merial Trowse. She didn't like me to mention murder, but bucked up at once when she thought I meant a horse, not a man. I'm going to find out more about that stallion. Apart from that, there are other fish to fry. What do you make of Grinsted's suggestion that John nipped into Percheron's stable that night to hamstring him?'

'There is the question of which was lying, Mrs Mapsted or Miss Gauberon, child.'

'I know,' said Laura. 'What's the answer, do you suppose? In other words, where do we go from here?'

'I think our best plan would be to open the Grammar School at Seahampton. I must rehearse my speech. It is difficult to know what will be acceptable upon these occasions. One's funny stories are all too apt to sound either banal or slightly blue.'

'Well, you said you'd got alternatives. Anyway, you can hardly say that you never got a prize at school, and that you don't believe in education.'

'True. I did get prizes at school, including one for deportment,' said Dame Beatrice with a triumphant leer. 'I feel that you cannot match that.'

'I got a prize in my kindergarten for cheerfulness,' said Laura proudly. 'It has stood me in good stead all my life. If you notice, I *am* cheerful. I feel I owe it as a duty, since I accepted the prize.'

'And what was the prize, child?'



‘A cruet set. A bit of a blow to one who had designs upon an infant’s tricycle. But that’s Fate. And Fate, as the Master of English prose has indicated, is apt to lie in wait with a wet sandbag. Mind you, one becomes accustomed to these things. That’s philosophy, that is.’

‘You fill me with awe,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Well, while I rehearse, which I propose to do aloud, you will be left to your own devices. Why not take the rest of the day and go to London? You may have the car.’

‘Nope,’ said Laura very decidedly. ‘If you really don’t want me to do anything here, I’ll go over and pump Cissie Gauberon, and bounce it out of her that she was telling lies at the inquest. And now, I wonder what’s for lunch?’

Lunch over, a replete and casually-costumed Laura — she was wearing slacks and a reefer jacket — strolled over to the Elkstonehunt riding stables. She found that, by the time she got there, the horses were being fed. It was then a quarter past three.

‘A bit early, isn’t it?’ she said to Jenkinson whom she found at Barb’s loose-box.

‘Not for some of ’em, Mrs Gavin,’ the groom replied. ‘Horses varies, and, anyway, we got the Colonel and his grandchildren coming over at just after four, rot the lot of ’em!’

He was obviously drunk, Laura noticed.

‘What’s that you’re giving Barb?’ she asked.

‘Her tea, ma’am,’ said Jenkinson insolently. Then, meeting Laura’s hostile eye, he added, ‘Her’s getting two pounds of oats, one of bran, and half a pound of chopped ’ay, which is economic, which we ’as to be ’ere, otherwise she’d pick out the good grass and leave the bad.’

‘Good old Barb,’ said Laura. ‘I say, Jenkinson, why do you feel so sure that Percheron killed Mr Mapsted? It doesn’t make sense, you know.’

The old man looked at her malevolently, and hiccupped.

‘It makes sense to me,’ he said. ‘If you knowed that horse as well as I know him, Mrs Gavin, you wouldn’t ask a question like to that.’

Laura shrugged her shoulders.

‘As you say,’ she remarked offhandedly. ‘Where’s Miss Gauberon?’

‘Having a look at Viatka.’

‘Oh, yes. How’s the kick?’

‘Getting on. Mrs Gavin. Funny about that kick.’

‘Yes, apparently. What’s your theory?’

‘Mrs Cofts.’

‘You think, then, that the mare did over-reach?’

‘Not Viatka, no. That there kick,’ said Jenkinson, pausing to belch, ‘come of Mrs Cofts a-lending that there mare to somebody she didn’t have ought to. That’s my ideer, Mrs Gavin, for what it’s worth.’

As Laura had not the slightest idea of how much it was worth, she gave a casual wave of the hand and walked off to the loose-box occupied by the unfortunate Viatka.

Cissie Gauberon was feeding the mare by giving her the chopped hay in handfuls.

‘Hullo,’ said Laura casually. ‘How is she?’

‘She’s all right. She misses John,’ Miss Gauberon replied. ‘She can’t make it out at all that he doesn’t come. I’ve explained that he’s gone to heaven,’ she added with some inconsequence, ‘but she doesn’t really think so.’

‘Why did you tell those lies at the inquest?’ demanded Laura. Cissie Gauberon studied her with Gallic amusement. Laura, the Scot, interpreted the attitude correctly. ‘I see,’ she said. ‘So you’re determined that the police are to make a do of it? You think they’ll find your evidence pretty fishy?’

‘I hope so,’ Cissie responded. ‘They ought to, oughtn’t they? Don’t you agree?’

‘Well, I do,’ said Laura. ‘The queer thing is that at the time I thought you were telling the truth and that old Mrs M. was lying.’

Cissie gave Viatka a good handful of oats.

‘She enjoys being spoilt,’ she said. ‘No, I can’t tell you at the moment which was which. Trouble is, I’d love to keep out of it all, but I don’t see how I can. I know Percheron. He didn’t trample anybody. And I know another thing or two, but I can’t let on, not even to you, although I know you’re all right.’

Laura accepted this compliment unemotionally.

‘So I get no farther,’ she said. ‘What would your reaction be if I told you that one of those brats from the Hall put me wise?’

‘Which one?’ asked Cissie warily.

‘So you do know?’ said Laura.

‘Know what?’

‘That somebody paid a clandestine sort of visit to John, and that the two of them had a row.’

Cissie shrugged.

‘I didn’t know at the time, but I found out afterwards,’ she said.

‘Same source of information as mine?’

‘Yes, I expect so. Ursula.’

‘Any idea at all who the other man could have been?’

‘Yes, but it’s nobody you know.’

At this moment a diversion was caused by the arrival of Colonel May, accompanied by the children. Miss Temme was not with the party but it had an addition in the person of Mrs Cofts, the vicar’s wife, who had come to see Viatka and to express her condolences to the mare and her apologies (for the third time) to Miss Gauberon.

The vicar’s wife had money and depended upon a mouse-like but efficient sister-in-law who had been given a home at the Vicarage and who had undertaken those tiresome and often futile duties in and about the parish which fall ordinarily to the lot of the incumbent’s spouse. Poor Miss Elizabeth Cofts did the district visiting, ran the Mothers’ Wednesday Afternoons, including a terrifying outing to Seahampton by coach each year, and gave a truly frightful Christmas party to which the mothers brought their children and at which there was always bitter feeling about whose Christmas cake was to achieve the place of honour in the centre of the centre table. Miss Cofts also kept the parish accounts (since a one-time churchwarden had once been found to fiddle them to his own advantage), visited the village school once a term, admonished the intemperate old and the ill-behaved young of the parish, helped the choirmaster to discipline the choirboys, took nourishing broth to the sick, patched up quarrels between neighbours, organized the annual Church Bazaar, typed her brother’s sermons, saw that the lawns were trimmed and the marquee ordered for the annual Vicarage garden-party, and pressed unwilling helpers into service at the Sunday School treat.

Mrs Cofts, who had married the vicar on the distinct understanding that she proposed to wash her hands of all these matters, treated her with ironic courtesy and gave her a comfortable home, excellent meals and a generous quarterly allowance. Miss Elizabeth Cofts resented the irony, appreciated the luxury, and, in any case, doted on her brother to such an extent that even if she had been banished to an attic and fed on the kitchen scraps she would still have been eager and anxious to live in his house and to serve him with all her strength. This, in spite of her mouse-like appearance, was considerable.

Mrs Cofts and Laura were acquaintances.

‘Hullo,’ said the latter, who was a firm believer in taking the bull by the horns. ‘Come to see Viatka?’

‘Why, yes,’ the incumbent’s wife agreed. ‘Can’t think how she came to be

kicked. I suddenly noticed she was limping when I brought her back.'

'It's these amateur bunglers,' said Laura. Mrs Cofts cocked an eyebrow.

'Amateurs, Mrs Gavin?'

'Don't tell me your kindness of heart didn't lead you astray! Who, exactly, rode Viatka home the last time you had her out?'

'I did, of course. Why should you suppose somebody else did? I should consider it highly immoral to lend to another person a horse I had hired.' Mrs Cofts looked displeased. Laura waved a shapely palm.

'Come back all I said,' she observed cordially. Mrs Cofts turned away to go to Viatka's loose-box and the thin-faced Ursula took her place at Laura's side.

'I say,' she observed in a conspiratorial tone, 'did lying old Cofts-Wofts tell you *she* rode Viatka home the last time she had her out?'

'You mind your manners,' said Laura, who had been trained as a school-marm. 'It's no business of yours what Mrs Cofts said to me.'

'I could tell you a thing or two more, you know, if you wouldn't be so stuffy,' said the horrible child. 'Mr Cofts may be ever so holy, but cook says he wouldn't be *her* cup of tea.'

'Go and wash that chocolate off your face,' retorted Laura. 'You look more than usually repulsive, you loathsome little gargoyle.'

'Oh, you *are* funny!' said Ursula, with as much affection as was in her to bestow. 'I *do* like the things you say. Don't you want to know who lamed Viatka? I know you do, so I shan't tell you, see?'

'If what you told was as truthful as the last of your yarns—' said Laura.

'But, Laura, that *was* true! It was! It was! It was!'

'All right, all right, all right. Who *did* lame Viatka, then?'

'One of the owners of riding-stables not so very far from here.'

Laura regarded the child with deep distrust.

'It was! It was!' screamed Ursula. 'Cross my heart and may I die! It *was* one of the owners! So there!'

Laura knew a good deal about the May children, and, although she knew her to be a prize liar on occasion, she felt that this time Ursula was speaking the truth. Whether this was so or not, it certainly seemed as though something out of keeping with a pastoral scene was, or had been, going on in the village, apart from the sudden death of John Mapsted.

She brooded again on the evidence given at the inquest: upon the extraordinary case of Percheron who did nothing at the time of his master's death, yet who created a disturbance some seven hours afterwards; upon the

discrepancy between the evidence given by old Mrs Mapsted and that of Cissie Gauberon; of the curious rider added to the jury's verdict; of the point that nobody but Jenkinson had seen blood on the stable floor and on Percheron's hoof, and, last but not least, of the extraordinary business of Mapsted's having had neither lantern nor torch with him when he entered the loose-box.

'It *looks* like murder,' was her conclusion, given to Dame Beatrice at dinner that evening, 'but, if it is, Jenkinson is out of the picture. He'd given away the fact that he took down the lantern from its usual place, but he agreed that John Mapsted's torch was still on the bedside table. He's quite smart enough to have lied about that if he'd had any guilty knowledge of John's death.'

'Quite,' Dame Beatrice agreed. 'I have re-cast my speech for the opening ceremony at the Seahampton Grammar School. It seems a pity, after the beautiful typing you did, and I apologize for wasting your time.'

'Think nothing of that, but I hope you're not proposing to jettison the bit from *Kubla Khan*. Your tongue-in-cheek quotations fill me with quiet joy.'

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Say It With Flowers

*‘... hoary - headed frosts  
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,  
And on old Hiem’s thin and icy crown  
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds  
Is, as in mockery, set.’*

Shakespeare



ON the morning of the great day Mr Bond was at the school early. He was not a nervous or fidgety man, but he was particularly anxious that the Official Opening of his school should be a success in the sense that the proceedings must suffer no hitch, let or hindrance.

His room had been unlocked at half-past eight by the chief caretaker and by twenty minutes to nine he was at his huge desk checking all the arrangements for the evening and racking his brains to find possible gaps and flaws. However, the programme he had outlined seemed fool-proof. On such an occasion as this he could trust even the boys.

At five minutes to nine — school Assembly was at a quarter past — his head assistant came for instructions, dreading that last-minute change of plan which is the bug-bear of conscientious teachers and the perquisite and habit of their superiors.

No plans were changed but there were plenty of instructions. As these had the force of Army orders the head assistant merely nodded gloomily and made notes in the small book which he kept for recording the headmaster’s more flighty and fantastic commandments.

‘Last-minute inspection of lavatories for inscriptions on the doors. Some of the governors have a nose for that sort of thing. Prurience, of course,’ said the headmaster. ‘Last word before they go home to the boys in the choir and have a look at the younger Small. He needed a hair-cut yesterday. See that Mr Cooper has tidied out his stock-cupboard. He keeps it in a filthy state. Have a look at the gardening-shed. Phipps doesn’t always insist that the boys clean the tools before

they are put away. Tell Collier to hide that broken balancing form. I'll report it later, but I don't want some poke-nose saying that we don't take care of the apparatus in the gymnasium. The piano-tuner is coming at eleven and the plants at eleven-thirty, so we'd better see that the piano is moved well away from the front of the stage so that the parks people can produce their effect without being bothered with the instrument's getting in their way.'

'Redmond wants the piano just where it is now, sir, for tonight,' interposed Mr Gadd.

'Yes, all right. Chalk round it. Chalk round it before you move it, then label the space *Piano*. Oh, and that reminds me. You might let a couple of Sixth-Form boys search underneath the stage — you know how to take out that front piece in the centre, I suppose? — to see whether the workmen have left any wood-shavings or other inflammable matter there. They are abominably careless about such things and there is always the risk of fire.'

'Very good, sir. I'll get hold of a key. Is there anything else?'

'No. I'll see the canteen people myself.'

Mr Gadd took himself off to send his form down to Assembly, and, immediately it was over, and before the piano-tuner and the plants and flowers arrived, he set two active lads to explore the cavern underneath the stage. He did not choose Sixth-Form boys, deeming it unlikely that these demi-gods of sport and scholarship would enjoy the experience of crawling on hands and knees in search of debris left by conscienceless workmen. He sent two of the Upper Fourth named Wilbraham and Jones to carry out the headmaster's orders, adjuring them to be sure to switch off the electric lights when they came out again and to put on their football shorts and jerseys in case the floor should be dirty; he was almost certain that it was.

The boys, good boys so far as that adjective can be employed to describe any boy still at school, contrived to make their search last throughout the periods scheduled for devotion to Latin and poetry, and caused it to end uncannily at a time when a shower and a change of clothing would bring them to the beginning of Chemistry, a popular subject at Seahampton because the master was thought to be slightly insane. They reported at midday to Mr Gadd. Except for the property boxes belonging to the Dramatic Society, there was nothing whatever underneath the stage. They did not add that for good measure, and to spin out the time, they had unpacked all the properties and tried on some of the costumes, and Mr Gadd, who was organizer of the Rambling Club and cared nothing for the Muse of drama, would not have cared anyway.

The choir were to be sent home at three, and so were the boys who were going to help the masters as stewards. The rest of the school was to be dismissed at a quarter to four, and Mr Bond was to take tea with the staff, most of whom lived too far from the school to be able to get home and back again in time for the ceremony.

Wilbraham and Jones having completed their inspection, bathed, and gone to their Chemistry class, the Council's men arrived with two lorries from which were unloaded a multiplicity of flowering shrubs, potted palms and serrated ferns. When these were in position at the sides of the stage and on the floor immediately below it, the offerings of the boys (or, rather, of a little boy named Dobson whose father kept the local flower shop) and the blooms, also provided by Dobson senior, which had been paid for out of School Fund, were arranged in vases by the school secretary, the Art master, and Dobson senior's shop-girl. The vases were placed on window-ledges, on the table on the platform, in the entrance vestibule, on the headmaster's desk and on tables in the canteen. School dinners were 'off' for the day; boys had been instructed to bring sandwiches and to eat them in the classrooms. Except for the four masters on duty, the staff had booked tables in the restaurant of the biggest local pub through the agency of Mr Spencer, a frequent ornament of its saloon bar.

At last the afternoon came to an end. The games master went off in his car. The head assistant, after a final scrutiny, walked to the bus stop; Mr Spencer and Mr Turnbull went down to the woodwork room to play cards; some of the younger masters departed on motor-cycles and motor-scooters and the senior music master, who was a law unto himself, sailed down the school drive on the vintage tricycle which had become a school legend. The headmaster and the rest of the staff took tea together as had been arranged.

By seven o'clock masters and boys had reassembled for the Official Opening, the choir in a horrid and sweating state of excitement and din, the stewards in black blazers and beautifully-creased grey flannels, the masters austere in gowns and many-coloured hoods.

Within the hall, a compact body of parents and friends, on chairs placed too close together for comfort, kept up a steady stream of comment and gossip.

Dame Beatrice, who had followed (for once) the advice of her French maid, arrived at a quarter past seven impeccably costumed and with her black hair beautifully dressed, and Laura, who had accompanied her, sat in the car and consumed the discreet and appetizing meal with which she proposed to keep the wolf at bay whilst she waited for the ceremony to terminate. She had refused an



invitation to be present at the proceedings by advancing a ridiculous but readily-accepted plea that she was forbidden to be in the audience when Dame Beatrice made a speech. The headmaster was grateful to anybody who refused his invitation to occupy a seat in the overcrowded hall. At twenty to eight he collected his platform of distinguished guests, ushered them in, and the ceremony began with a hymn and prayers.

Dame Beatrice had the seat of honour in the middle of the platform. She was supported by the headmaster on one side and the Chairman of the Governors on the other. She sat motionless and was apparently absorbed in the proceedings. Actually she was wondering whether Laura had done well or ill to give up teaching in order to become her secretary. She thought that, on the whole, Laura had done quite well.

The time came for her to speak. The headmaster introduced her, there was polite applause, and the school captain, a courteous, dignified, rather handsome boy, presented her with a bouquet. Dame Beatrice accepted the tribute gracefully but with a low and sinister cackle which had disconcerted more experienced people than the boy.

Her speech was short, witty and without anecdotes, and, partly if not entirely owing to its brevity, it was gratefully received by the audience. After votes of thanks (the headmaster had ruthlessly cut these to three), there was music, a Latin oration by the top boy in the Classical Sixth, and then the gathering broke up.

‘Do come along, Dame Beatrice,’ said the headmaster, ‘and have something to eat. Our canteen looks after us quite well on these occasions.’

After an interval during which such notables as had not met Dame Beatrice before the ceremony were rounded up by the headmaster and introduced, the half-dozen most important guests were adroitly shepherded to the headmaster’s room and given black coffee and cognac, and at just after ten, as there was still no sign of Dame Beatrice (although the boys and what might be termed the rank-and-file of the visitors had begun to trickle home), Laura said to the chauffeur:

‘I’m just going to pop in and have a look round, George. You might come and fish me out if Dame Beatrice turns up while I’m gone.’

‘Very good, miss.’ So Laura strolled in at the main entrance and made for the hall. The decorations were superb. She stood in the doorway for a few minutes to admire the general effect, worked her way to the back of the hall and then went up the centre aisle for a closer view. The closer view disclosed something for which she was utterly unprepared. As she leaned over to admire a particularly

fine display of early daffodils she found herself staring at a body they screened. It was the body of a man, but his head was a mass of grape-hyacinths, so that his face could not be seen.

‘Good Lord!’ said Laura aloud, her voice ringing out oddly in the vast and empty hall. Gingerly she removed the grape-hyacinths and found herself staring into the pallid face of Jenkinson, the late John Mapsted’s groom.

Laura dashed round in search of her employer, but, as Dame Beatrice was at the headmaster’s private party, naturally enough she did not find her. She returned to the car, therefore, acquainted the discreet chauffeur with the news, and then honked SOS three times in Morse code on the horn. This had the effect of bringing Dame Beatrice on the scene. Laura explained briefly why she had called her.

‘Jenkinson?’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Very interesting.’

Leaving Laura to separate the headmaster from his more important guests, she went into the hall, moved those plants which surrounded and screened Jenkinson’s body, and knelt beside it to make a preliminary examination. The headmaster and Laura joined her. They were accompanied by a grey-haired man who had been introduced previously as Doctor Castleton.

‘This is dreadful,’ said Mr Bond. ‘Can anything be done for the poor fellow?’

Dame Beatrice had risen to make way for the other doctor. He, too, made a brief examination,

‘Case for the police, I suppose,’ he said, rising and brushing at the knees of his dress trousers. ‘Natural death, on the face of it, but who on earth can have put him here?’

‘It is a bizarre situation,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘He might as well already be at his funeral, surrounded, like this, with flowers! Well, I had better put all these plants back as they were before we call in official assistance.’

‘The police will bring their own doctor, I suppose, although there’s no reason to suspect foul play. What do you say, Dame Beatrice?’ asked Doctor Castleton.

‘Well, he certainly has not been hit on the head by a blunt instrument,’ said Dame Beatrice tranquilly, ‘and he shows no symptoms of death by poison, neither is there any sign of a wound or trace of bleeding. The post-mortem may tell us something more.’

‘I’d better get rid of everybody,’ said Mr Bond. ‘One comfort: a good many have already gone, and the rest, except for Colonel Winstanworth, who is staying the night at my house, are on the point of departure.’

He returned to his study, and his guests, in ones and twos, departed thence

and were ushered into cars by the caretaker. From the school canteen and the dining-hall seeped the lesser lights. When all had been courteously dismissed, the headmaster rang up the police, and within ten minutes the local Superintendent had arrived and had taken charge.

The fact that Dame Beatrice and Laura could identify the body was helpful in its way; the fact that they could give the dead man's home address saved the time and labour of the police; but the fact that Seahampton Grammar School, with which the dead man could have had no possible connection, had been chosen for Jenkinson's resting-place was puzzling in the extreme.

'Looks as though somebody meant to give a hint that the death wasn't as innocent as it looked,' commented Laura when she and Dame Beatrice were on their way back to the Stone House with the broad and reassuring bulk of George the chauffeur in front of them. 'When did Jenkinson die?'

'After midday today, at any rate, child.'

'Then — no, it's fantastic!'

'What is?'

'That anybody should have put him where he was found. There was a touch of the funereal about it.'

'The floral tributes *were* rather impressive, I thought. When the police have had their say, and the school is clear of them, I propose to interview the persons who had charge of the decorations.'

'I say...'

'Say on, child.'

'Well, *was* Jenkinson's a natural death?'

'It certainly had that appearance.'

'That means you don't believe it was. I don't, either. Can there be some subtle poison which neither you nor Doctor Castleton could spot at first go?'

'Time will show, I hope. There is one thing which is certain. The body could not have been placed in position before the plants and flowers were first arranged, but it must have been kept close at hand, I should imagine. I asked Mr Bond at what time the decorations were completed, and it turns out that they were finished at half-past eleven this morning.'

'Dinner-hour,' said Laura.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Easiest time to have put the body among the plants would have been during the dinner-hour, don't you think? Or, of course, after school. That's it! Oh, but between the time school finished and the people came to the Opening, the hall

would be locked up so that the cleaners and people weren't able to get in and raise dust. Oh, dear! That's a nasty snag! If it was locked up—'

'The body and its transporters were locked up, too. There is no snag there, child. But where could both have remained hidden?'

'Oh, underneath the stage. There's a storage space there. You can see the keyholes in the middle of the front, where a section lifts out. You can keep stage properties there, and extra electrical equipment, and so on. If the person, or people, got in there... oh, but they'd have to leave the front off. You couldn't pull it back from inside. At least, I shouldn't think you could.'

'Well, there seems plenty of material with which to begin an investigation,' said Dame Beatrice. 'It would be interesting to know who was the last person to close the front opening and for what purpose the space under the stage was last used.'

Some information was forthcoming next morning, for Dame Beatrice rang up the headmaster to ask the question and some others which had occurred to her. The headmaster invited her to go over to the school. He had definite answers to give. At midday two boys deputed to carry out the task had come to him to report that they had searched the storage space underneath the stage and that it was clear except for property baskets and suit-cases containing costumes for the school play. These boys had begun their search at twenty minutes to ten and had finished at eleven.

The hall had been locked up during afternoon school and had not been reopened until half-past six, an hour before the ceremony had been due to begin. Between half-past six and half-past seven, therefore, all members of the staff, and anybody else who happened to be on the school premises, could have gone into the hall. It was out-of-bounds for all boys except the older boys who had been helping as stewards, but these, with members of the staff, had been on duty from half-past six onwards.

Dame Beatrice then asked whether the police were at the school. It appeared that they were not; that they had called earlier and then had announced that they would seek 'other avenues' before troubling the headmaster further. Mr Bond indicated that he translated this as an attempt on their part to obtain information from Jenkinson's acquaintances before committing themselves to the doubtful policy of accusing somebody at the school of perpetrating a morbid practical joke.

'It shows some attempt at reasoning on the Superintendent's part,' commented Mr Bond. 'Boys are capable of extraordinary actions, but this one

would not, I think, be psychologically possible to any boys here at present. It seems to me to be the sort of thing which an inebriated band of delinquent youths might have thought of as a humorous gesture.'

'It is interesting that you should say that. We have information that the dead man was a pronounced alcoholic,' said Dame Beatrice.

'You think, then, that he might have had a bad fall?'

'No, I haven't allowed for that. There is no evidence of external injury.'

'Then...?'

'Tetraethyl-thiuram-disulphide, dear headmaster.'

'Fatal?'

'Sometimes.'

'But...'

'I know. But, occasionally, surely, the remedy *is* worse than the complaint?'

'No opinion forthcoming,' said Mr Bond, thinking the deep thoughts of a conscientious headmaster, 'except that excess of zeal is always a mistake.'

'I was not thinking of excess of zeal; only of excess of tetraethyl-thiuram-disulphide.'

'You're not suggesting that this unfortunate man was *murdered*?'

'Then I don't know what I *am* suggesting,' said Dame Beatrice calmly; and she gave Mr Bond a succinct but sufficient account of the mysterious death of John Mapsted.

'And this man Jenkinson may have had guilty knowledge, you think?' asked the headmaster at the end of the recital.

Dame Beatrice shrugged her thin shoulders.

'We have yet to find out why John Mapsted was killed, and whether by human or by equine agency,' she said.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### In Retrospect

*‘Let us sum up now the meagre yet certain fruits of our long analysis.’*

Edgar Allan Poe



‘S O where do we go from here?’ demanded Laura when Dame Beatrice got back to the Stone House and reported the conversation.

‘I think we employ you as detective,’ said Dame Beatrice, knowing that this suggestion would please her secretary and might even keep her out of mischief.

‘Ah!’ Laura was gratified and beamed widely upon her employer.

‘You had better find a little more from that child who overheard the quarrel between John Mapsted and the so-far nameless individual who appears to have threatened him. To what extent is the little girl reliable as a witness?’

‘Not to any extent at all. All those grandchildren of the Colonel’s are juvenile delinquents in the making. Horrors and beasts, each and all.’

‘Dear me! Are you, perhaps, a little prejudiced?’

‘No, I’m not. They are, without exception, the cagiest collection of brats I’ve ever encountered. The Prince of Liars could learn a lot from young Ursula, and as for the boy, Machiavelli was a child compared with him.’

‘Yet you formed the opinion, at the time, I think, that little Ursula was telling the truth.’

‘Well, yes, I did. That’s sure enough. All right, then. I’ll go over and sort her. I may be able to get a clear description of the man, although, if it’s nobody we know, it won’t help much.’

She found the Colonel’s grandchildren at lessons with Miss Temme. Miss Temme, who, beneath a veneer of neighbourly heartiness, disliked Laura intensely, said:

‘Ursula’s doing her goes-into’s. I can’t disturb her for a bit.’

‘No, I’m not. I can’t do the beastly things and I’m sick of trying. Who cares how many sevens in two hundred and one, anyway?’ demanded Ursula reasonably, but in a truculent tone.

‘There’s only one way of teaching stupid kids to get sums right,’ said Laura off-handedly. ‘You should use a darts board.’

‘I’m *not* stupid!’ yelled Ursula, flinging down her pencil. ‘I can do sums perfectly well if I want to.’

‘So can the cat,’ retorted Laura. Ursula glared at her and then began to giggle. ‘Come on, now,’ Laura went on. ‘How many sevens in twenty? If you say three, you’ve had it!’

‘It’s two!’ shouted Dick.

‘Get on with your map, Dick,’ said Miss Temme.

‘It’s two and six over!’ yelled Dick. ‘And seven into sixty-one goes... Heck! Why couldn’t you have made it sixty-three?’ he demanded of Miss Temme. ‘It’s so *wasteful* having five over when just another two would make it come right out!’

‘Decimals are the answer to that one,’ said Laura, drawing a chair up to the table. ‘Shove down the decimal point—’

‘What for?’ asked Ursula.

‘I’m afraid they’re not *nearly* up to decimals,’ said Miss Temme.

‘You shut your face,’ said Dick. Laura smacked a hard and stinging palm down on to his bare thigh.

‘You shut yours,’ she said crisply. Sarah, aged six, looked up from her drawing.

‘Shut yours,’ she said approvingly; and bent again to the task of depicting a giant bird pecking a man’s eyes out. Laura picked up the pencil which Ursula had flung down.

‘Add a nought,’ she said, ‘and carry the figure... let’s see, what was it?’

‘Five!’ yelled both the older children.

‘Goes seven and one over!’ screamed Ursula before her brother could get the words out. ‘What’s the dot for, anyway?’

‘Tenths,’ said Laura curtly. ‘Next figure, which will be a one, hundredths, then thousandths, tens of thousandths, hundreds of thousandths, millionths, and so forth, but most people accept five decimal places and then standardize.’

‘I’m afraid that is all much above their heads,’ said Miss Temme.

‘It’s probably above yours, but then, you’re a moron,’ said Dick, rubbing his thigh and glancing sideways at Laura’s shapely but powerful hands. Laura laughed, tossed down the pencil and said cheerfully:

‘I have a message from my D.B.E. for Ursula.’

‘Very well,’ said Miss Temme, defeated. ‘Ursula, you may go.’

‘Me too,’ said Dick.

‘You afterwards,’ said Laura. ‘I don’t want any prompting of the witness.’

‘It’s about the spiv who killed Mr Mapsted, isn’t it, Laura?’ said Ursula, when they were in the dining-room together.

‘It is. Describe him again.’

‘He was tall, quite a bit taller than you and a lot taller than Miss Temme — and he needed a shave but he didn’t talk like the village people. My guess, for what it’s worth, is that he came from the airfield over at Canbury Chase.’

‘Why?’ asked Laura.

‘Well, I’m sure I’ve seen him before, and, by sort of working it out, I can’t think of anywhere else it could have been. Daddy took us there last September to meet Auntie Marion from Malta, and I expect he was one of the stewards or something.’

‘Look here, are you on the level about this?’

‘Oh, yes, Laura, of course I am!’

‘Right. We’ll push over to the airfield this afternoon, then. I’ll subscribe to a mount for you if you keep mum about our real objective. But if you start blabbing—!’

‘Can I ride Shan?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Dick will create,’ said Ursula, obviously enjoying this prospect.

‘No, he won’t. He’ll come with us, and no conspiracies, mind, or maybe you’ll land yourself in jug.’

‘You shouldn’t frighten children with unrealizable threats,’ said Ursula.

‘An Approved School, then.’

‘Oh, those are for *dirty* children,’ said Ursula, unimpressed. Laura grinned.

‘You win,’ she said, ‘but for goodness’ sake behave prettily for once.’

‘You said I’d be working in with Scotland Yard.’

‘So you will, image, if you don’t play me up.’

While Laura was engaged in, to her mind, the thankless task of getting Ursula May to identify the unknown man who had threatened John Mapsted, Dame Beatrice was in pursuit of further evidence at the Seahampton Grammar School.

‘I should like,’ she said to Mr Bond, ‘to speak to the boys who explored the cavern underneath the stage in the hall.’

Wilbraham and Jones were produced and proved to be spotty but intelligent lads of about fifteen. The news that a dead body had been found among the



ceremonial plants had not been made public, and they could not imagine why the elderly, yellow-skinned, reptilian lady who had declared the school open should display such interest in their explorations. However, she answered her questions readily enough, although it was embarrassing for them to find themselves confessing to having spent nearly two periods in a search which the headmaster thought should have taken less than a quarter of an hour.

‘So,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘Mr Gadd sent for you immediately after Assembly and you began your search at, roughly, a quarter to ten. At a quarter to eleven you emerged from beneath the stage, having found nothing to report, and took a shower because you were grimy?’

‘I can’t think what on earth you were doing all that time,’ said Mr Bond.

‘We thought we had to go through all the property baskets and things, sir.’

‘And then, sir, we’d got so dirty, sir—’

‘At ten-forty-five and during the quarter of an hour allowed for a break between lessons you took your showers,’ went on Dame Beatrice, ‘and then you went to your Chemistry class, which lasted until twelve noon. At what time did the piano-tuner arrive?’ she enquired, turning to Mr Bond.

‘He was early, I believe, but I’m not quite sure of the time. He moves in the orbit of Redmond,’ said Mr Bond.

‘Please, sir, we heard him. He was tinkling about ten minutes before the bell went for break,’ said Wilbraham.

‘Yes, yes, I remember,’ said Mr Bond. ‘My secretary buzzed me at about half-past ten to say that he had arrived, so I told her to find out whether the piano had been moved to be out of the way of the plants people, who turned up at a quarter-past eleven.’

‘It all seems very satisfactory,’ said Dame Beatrice. She leered at the boys, who received this tribute with polite but nervous grins.

‘Very well. You two can cut along,’ said their headmaster. ‘You find the times satisfactory? How do you mean, exactly?’ he went on, when the boys had shut the door behind them.

‘The times exonerate the piano-tuner and the men who came with the plants. The only place, it seems to me, where the body could have been left before it was hidden among the plants is under the stage. It could not have been put there while the boys were there, so we may assume that the piano-tuner did not bring it with him, and if he was still in the hall when the men arrived with the plants presumably he would have mentioned it if they had brought the body with them.’

The headmaster accepted this example of logic gravely.

‘He is a very conscientious man but takes what I always think is an unnecessarily long time over his tuning,’ he said. ‘The men had finished the plants and the arrangement of the flowers by one o’clock, and at a quarter-past one the tuner asked for Mr Redmond, my senior music master, to try both pianos — we have one in the music room, of course — and say whether he was satisfied.’

‘Ah, now we come to it. After the piano-tuner had gone—’

‘Redmond, who had had his lunch, remained in the hall for the rest of the dinner-hour. I could hear him playing. He tried over the School Song and then played a good deal of Bach. I went in to him about five minutes before afternoon school began and reminded him of the time. He is a most talented fellow, but is apt to forget that he has school duties to perform. We came out of the hall together and I handed my keys to Marsh, the senior prefect, and ordered him to lock the hall doors and to return the keys immediately. They were back in my possession within three minutes.’

‘And the hall was not unlocked again until half-past six?’

‘No. As I think I told you, people arrived and were shown into the hall from that time onwards, and as soon as the hall was unlocked there were stewards on duty. I really cannot see—’

‘No,’ said Dame Beatrice; but her black eyes were alight with interest. ‘No, I cannot see it, either, and yet, of course, it must have been so, must it not?’

‘I’m afraid I don’t follow.’

‘If all these times are correct — and I am perfectly certain that they are — the body must have been brought in after the ceremony was over, yet I find that scarcely feasible, you know.’

‘Well, it is all extremely odd and makes me feel very uneasy. I *think*,’ said Mr Bond, ‘that we must get the Town Hall people to send their men back with the plants and flowers. It was a strange — a remarkably strange — occurrence, and I confess I should welcome an explanation, so that the whole matter may be cleared up. I shall be thankful to return to routine.’

‘I am sorry to take up so much of your time,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘but, in a case of murder, if that’s what it is—’

‘It will be interesting to hear the result of the post-mortem. Yet, if your surmise is correct — I am nothing of a chemist, but I recognise the formula — an unfortunate relative of mine — but, well, the point at issue seems to me that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to prove wilful murder by such a means.’

‘I agree fully. It will be difficult, if not impossible, to prove wilful murder,

although what other kind of murder there can be I confess I don't know.'

Mr Bond rang up the Town Hall and was put through to the chairman of the Parks Committee, who happened to be a retired Civil Servant and was available at an hour when the rest of the committee members were out at work.

'About the flowers for my Official Opening,' said Mr Bond.

'I hope nothing wrong?' said the chairman.

'By no means. In fact, I should like a plan of the arrangement of plants for the school activities. It was, after all, a unique occasion and undoubtedly people were impressed with the decorations.'

'Well, yes, they were quite good,' said the chairman. 'But as to a *plan* — oh, I know! Of course! Garbour. He's your man.'

'Garbour? Afraid I don't—'

'It's all right. You wouldn't know him. I'll send him along when he's had his dinner. Two o'clock suit you? Good-bye.'

'I can't offer you a canteen lunch. It's against regulations, I am sorry to say. But if you would care...?' said Mr Bond. 'It is a most respectable hostelry.'

'It is very kind of you,' said Dame Beatrice. They returned to the school, after a lunch provided by the local public house, to find a red-faced, inarticulate young man in the entrance vestibule of the school.

'Ah, you'll be Mr Garbour,' said the headmaster. 'Come this way, please.'

Mr Garbour suddenly found his voice.

'You'll want to know how the plants was *distributed*,' he said. 'Well, got any chalk?'

The headmaster went into his stockroom and produced a cardboard box.

'Oh, *white*!' said Mr Garbour disparagingly. 'It was more the colours, if you get me.'

Mr Bond returned to the stock cupboard and brought back seven cardboard boxes.

'Hm!' said Mr Garbour. 'Inartistic, these scholastic chinks. Look at that for a green! Monkey-sickness, I calls him. Well, now.' He preceded them into the hall and proceeded to make a colourful pattern on the floor just in front of the stage. 'That was how us done her,' he concluded, stepping back and admiring his handiwork. Mr Bond glanced at Dame Beatrice. She picked a stick of chalk out of each box and made rapid flourishes in the middle of the hall.

'Looking down on the arrangement from the centre front of the platform, it was more like this,' she said.

The expert studied her work in silence for a full minute.

‘Yes,’ he said at the end of that time. ‘Yes, I’m bound to say there’s possibilities there, but that certainly weren’t the way us left it for ee. Weren’t ee satisfied, like, with our job?’

‘Perfectly satisfied. Oh, yes, delighted,’ said Mr Bond hastily. ‘I must find out who interfered with it, that’s all.’

‘Boys!’ said Mr Garbour feelingly. ‘Although, mind you,’ he added, ‘put a coffin in the midst of that there, with them two miniature cedars kind of spreading over it, and them grape-hyacinths on top — see what I mean? — I don’t say but what you haven’t got an idea. Ar. An idea. Very mathematical and nice. I like a bit of symmetry, I do.’ He extracted a large pin from the lapel of his coat, picked his teeth thoughtfully with it, put it back, and nodded judiciously. ‘Almost perffessional,’ he added. ‘Will that be all, sir?’

‘Why the coffin?’ demanded Mr Bond. ‘What’s that got to do with it?’

‘Well, arst yourself, sir,’ returned the expert. ‘This here arrangement’ — he jerked his head at Dame Beatrice’s artistry — ‘cries aloud for a funeral, don’t it? It’s what I’d call very tasteful, like, for *that*, but for a school Official Opening, sir — no. Though I’d like to meet the lad as did it, all the same. That lad’s got talent, that lad ’as.’

Laura had obtained permission to take the two older children out, and their departure from the house was timed to coincide with the beginning of the six-year-old’s afternoon nap.

‘Although what she’ll do when she wakes up and finds the other two gone, I tremble to think,’ said Miss Temme. Laura ignored this remark and strode off to the riding stables with her charges trotting beside her.

‘No arguments,’ she commanded, when they reached the gates of Cissie Gauberon’s establishment. ‘Any fuss from either of you, and I leave you flat and do my own detecting. You’ll ride what you’re given to ride. All right?’

‘You can pick and choose, Laura,’ said Cissie gloomily, when Laura canvassed her opinion. ‘I’ve got a full house this afternoon.’

‘I want Shan,’ said Dick. Ursula glanced at Laura.

‘I don’t. I want Barb,’ she said, going up to the beautiful little Arab and giving it a piece of sugar. ‘I’m going to ride a horse, not a children’s pony!’

‘O.K., then,’ said Laura. ‘I’ll have Mustang, as usual. We’re going over to the airport, Cissie. I suppose the gees won’t mind?’

‘Oh, no. Look here, there won’t be anything doing here this afternoon. I’ll come with you on Viatka. She’s quite fit again and spoiling for an outing. Mrs Cofts is riding Jennet now.’

‘Oh? Why is that?’

‘I’ve no idea. I’m not sorry, though. She can say what she likes, but she hasn’t told me the truth yet about that overreach!’

‘Can you really spare the time to come along?’ asked Laura. She did not know whether she was glad or sorry that Cissie had suggested accompanying the party.

‘Oh, yes. It’s a nuisance Jenkinson’s taken himself off, but old Mrs Mapsted can look after anybody who comes to hire a ride. I’ll pop up to the house to tell her.’

This excursion proved unnecessary, for at that moment old Mrs Mapsted appeared in the kitchen garden and walked towards the paddock.

‘Thought I heard voices,’ she said as she came up to the others. ‘Oh, you children, is it? Behaving yourselves?’

‘Yes, thank you, Mrs Mapsted,’ said Ursula primly. For some reason which nobody in the village had discovered, old Mrs Mapsted possessed an uncanny power over the detestable little Mays, her mere presence being sufficient to render them as harmless as the toads with which (unfairly to the toads) Laura was apt to compare them. ‘We were just going for a ride.’

‘You keep your worriting little heels out of the horses’ ribs, then. I suppose Laura is treating you, is she? You’ve had your morning ride.’

‘Yes. It’s — it’s very kind of her,’ stammered Dick, who, against his will, had not succeeded in avoiding the old lady’s intimidating eye.

‘Kindness that will be chalked *up* to her and *down* to you, especially if you don’t behave yourselves,’ said old Mrs Mapsted tartly. ‘God can read and write, you know.’

The whole party received with respectful silence this non-proven verdict on the educational attainments of the Deity. Then Cissie Gauberon said:

‘Keep an eye on things, Mrs M., will you? Going to push over to the airport to mind the nags while Laura and the kids look at aeroplanes.’

‘Oh, yes, he’s a co-pilot, or some such, on a charter plane or a ferry service or something,’ announced the old lady surprisingly. ‘Swiss watches or South African diamonds or some such rubbish. Tried to get Jack interested in smuggling. Stables to be used as a cover, you know. Saddle-flap receptacles. Sounds more like diamonds. Brought in from Amsterdam, I expect. Jack had a row with him. I was inside the piggeries and heard ’em.’

‘I heard them, too,’ said Ursula.

‘Aha!’ said the old lady. ‘Little pigs have big ears! All right, Cissie, my girl.’

And if that Mrs Cofts turns up she's to have—?’

‘Jennet.’

‘Jennet. Not that I know one of the brutes from another, but I suppose *she* does. Well, enjoy yourselves.’ She dived a hand into the basket she was carrying and drew out a paper bag from which she extracted two enormous boiled sweets. She presented one to each child with the remark, ‘Gob-stoppers, and I hope they live up to their name.’ Then she walked away.

‘I suppose *she* wouldn’t come with us if I got the car out?’ said Laura. ‘Do you think she was serious about that man and John?’

‘You never know, with her,’ Cissie replied. ‘But she wouldn’t come. She never goes anywhere except once a year to London for the Chelsea Flower Show.’

‘Flower show? Is she fond of flowers?’ demanded Laura, leaping to an exciting but unwarrantable conclusion.

‘I suppose she must be,’ said Cissie indifferently, ‘although all she grows here are vegetables.’

‘Please, can’t we start?’ asked Ursula.

‘The gees are all ready except for saddling,’ said Cissie. ‘It *is* a blasted nuisance about Jenkinson! I can’t think why he’s done it. I haven’t set eyes on him for days. He won a bit on the pools last week, so I suppose he went on the bend with it and is sleeping off the effects. He’s a fearful old soak, you know. Come on, you kids! Clap those saddles on, and let’s get weaving.’

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## CHAPTER NINE

### A Stale Smell of Red Herring

*‘Walking down this avenue... we come to the Fish Wharf, where, during the “herring harvest,” scenes of great excitement and clamour may be witnessed as the laden vessels come in and discharge their finny cargoes ... Upwards of 2000 lasts of herrings have been landed here in one day, and when we consider that a last contains 13,200 fish, thus giving a total of 26,000,000 herrings caught in a single day, we may well be amazed, and wonder wherever they all go to. Perhaps it is not generally known that, according to local legend, a herring, like Balaam’s ass, once spoke ...’*

Ernest R. Suffling



RIDING beside Cissie with the two children ambling along in front where an eye, presumably, could be kept on them, Laura was silent. Cissie, accustomed to the society of monosyllabic men and to that of old Mrs Mapsted, who spoke only when she saw the necessity, seemed unperturbed by Laura’s unsociability and jogged contentedly along beside her.

Laura, who loved talking, was in a quandary. Already, and most uncomfortably for her, the subject of Jenkinson’s absence from the Elkstonehunt stables had already come up, and although it was only natural that it should, Laura, who knew only too well the reason for the groom’s absence, felt that unless she kept a careful guard over her tongue she would be bound to let out that reason to Cissie. As the secret of Jenkinson’s strange appearance at the Opening of Seahampton Grammar School had so far been strictly kept, she felt that it behoved her to maintain this secrecy. She could only hope that Cissie would not refer again to the subject.

The riders soon left the road for a wide track across the heather and through sparsely-wooded glades of that part of the Forest. Laura, finding that Cissie was apparently engrossed in her own thoughts, took heart, and enjoyed the ride.

Although it was early in the year, there were tangible signs of spring. Already the perennial, starry wood anemone was filling the copses, and where the riders' way at one point skirted the Forest proper and ran beside hedges, the banks were golden with the lesser celandine. Back in the woods Laura had noticed that the arrow-shaped, dark-speckled leaves of the cuckoo-pint were showing, and there was ground-ivy in the copses. In the open woods, the barren strawberry raised false hopes with its white, wide-open flowers.

The Forest paths were a short cut to the airport and an hour brought the children within sight of it. They reined in and called back to know how much nearer they could ride.

'I think we'll go as far as Furze Turn,' said Cissie. 'Then you three can push off and leave me with the horses.'

'What do I have to do, Laura?' asked Ursula, when the three were on foot.

'Nothing, until I've found out where we're allowed to stand and watch the planes,' Laura replied. 'Come on. I'll leave you two by that wired gate. It's only a small airport, so I don't suppose there'll be any fuss.'

She left the children at the spot she had indicated, and walked to another gate which stood open. There was the bleating sound of a horn behind her, and she stepped aside to let through a dark blue, powerful police car. From where she had left the children came shrill yelps of excitement, and, in a moment, they had come tearing up, Ursula leading.

'Laura!' she shouted. 'It's him!'

'Now, then,' remonstrated Laura. 'The dope, and keep it short. What's who?'

'The policeman in that car! He wasn't in uniform when he told Mr Mapsted off, but I *know* it's him.'

Laura scanned the child narrowly, but she seemed in earnest.

'Heaven help you if you're leading me up the garden,' she said. 'All right. Go back to where I left you. I'll investigate.' She marched on to the small airfield and was at once challenged.

'I'm the wife of a Scotland Yard officer, Special Branch,' she said briskly, 'and I particularly want to speak to the police constable who just drove in.' By great good luck she could produce one of Detective Chief-Inspector Robert Gavin's cards. He always insisted that she carried one or two of them about with her so that she could get out of trouble if she got herself involved, he explained.

'So there it is,' said Laura to Dame Beatrice when she got back as dusk was falling. 'The chap *was* a policeman; he *admits* going to John Mapsted's place; he says that the gist of the conversation as reported by young Ursula is true in



substance, but his explanation (for which I'd no right whatever to ask, but he's a police constable with ambitions and Gavin's card was an Open Sesame to his heart) is that it wasn't threats but a tip-off that the police were watching for smugglers at the airport, that they were acting on information received (Jenkinson, I expect), and that John had better watch his step. So that's *one* promising clue gone west! The only comfort is that young Ursula wasn't lying, for once in her black-hearted little existence.'

'Did this police constable indicate that John Mapsted had had any hand in the smuggling?' Dame Beatrice enquired.

'He said the police didn't know, but that he'd always liked John and thought him a decent sort, so he decided to tip him the wink. John, it appears, was very shirty about it, but the constable didn't know whether that was a sign of guilt, of annoyance that the police had wind of the game, or the just indignation of an honest citizen wrongly suspected.'

'And which do *you* think it was?' asked Dame Beatrice.

'Well, I still think John was bumped off, and now there's this peculiar business of Jenkinson. By the way, the fact of his disappearance cropped up in conversation with Cissie Gauberon. I didn't let on that he was dead.'

'If there is any good reason why she should not be told, I will give it you in the morning. I cannot, at the moment, see why she should not know. She will be bound to know sooner or later, because of the funeral. I telephoned Seahampton — the doctor who examined Jenkinson, you know — and he will let me know the result of the post-mortem as soon as he knows it himself.'

'According to Cissie, Jenkinson was an old sponge.'

'That would indicate that one of my conclusions might very well be correct.'

'Which one?'

'That somebody gave Jenkinson an overdose of tetraethyl-thiuram-disulphide, child.'

'That impressive compound doesn't seem to ring a bell.'

'It is intended to help alcoholics to lose their taste for beers, wines and spirits.'

'Oh, the stuff your nearest and dearest slip into your morning cup of tea to get you to sign the pledge! But that's innocent enough, surely! Dozens of people must be taking it in every town in England! It simply makes your next drink taste like the brew of Macbeth's witches. Surely it's harmless?'

'Under certain circumstances it can be fatal. A friend of mine, a psychoanalyst, has researched into the subject.'

‘But you couldn’t prove that those circumstances, whatever they are, necessarily proved fatal to Jenkinson, could you?’

‘It would be very difficult. Probably, as you point out, quite impossible.’

‘In other words, if Jenkinson hadn’t been found dead in such a peculiar place, you wouldn’t have thought of this tetra-ethyl stuff?’

‘No, I don’t suppose for one moment that I should.’

Then, if we could find out who put him there, we might get on the track of something very important. What’s the next move?’

‘I think we will go and ask Mrs Mapsted what the next move ought to be.’

‘Why? What can she tell us?’

‘A good deal, I imagine, if she can be persuaded to co-operate. But to obtain her co-operation may be very difficult.’

‘Yes, she’s all of a queer old body.’

‘Does nothing strike you as being almost as extraordinary as the circumstances we are investigating?’

‘I don’t think so. What?’

‘The attitude of Mrs Mapsted to the loss of her son.’

‘Oh, that! Come to think of it, she hasn’t shown signs of being exactly grief-stricken, has she? But, then, as I say, she’s very peculiar. She’s probably being stoical over it. I should think she’s got plenty of guts.’

‘Yes. That may be the answer, of course. Our housemaid reports that village gossip has it that she was quite unmoved at the funeral, and that she chose for the deceased’s favourite hymn the first two verses only of Milton’s version of Psalm 82.’

‘Sorry, but the reference eludes me.’

The Lord will come and not be slow,  
His footsteps cannot err;  
Before him righteousness shall go,  
His royal harbinger.

Truth from the earth, like to a flower,  
Shall bud and blossom then;  
And justice, from her heavenly bower,  
Look down on mortal men.

‘It sounds vengeful,’ said Laura. ‘I suppose that’s how she meant it—calling down judgment on whoever, or whatever, was responsible for John’s death.’

‘The village takes a different view.’

‘Good heavens! Not a song of triumph on old Mrs M’s part?’

‘Yes, indeed.’

‘Nasty-minded old stick-in-the-muds! Who leads that school of thought?’

‘The idea is said to have been based upon an indiscreet remark let fall by Mrs Cofts.’

‘But the village loathes Mrs Cofts!’

‘That would not prevent the villagers, the women particularly, from taking note of what she says, and of repeating and even embroidering it if it was of a harmful or scandalous nature. No, a talk with Mrs Mapsted is of the first importance. We will go over there tomorrow morning. What a comfort it is that, thanks to many improving conversations with my dear nephew Carey Lestrangle, I am well primed on the subject of pig-breeding.’

‘You know what *I* can’t help thinking,’ said Laura, ‘Is that *two* men must have visited John Mapsted about that smuggling racket. One was the policeman whose remarks were overheard by that little viper Ursula, and the other must have been the smuggler himself, overheard by old Mrs M. It remains to establish dates.’

It was arranged that, although both were to visit the Elkstonehunt stables that morning, Laura would engage Cissie Gauberon in conversation, and, in the course of it, inform her of Jenkinson’s death, while Dame Beatrice interviewed the old lady.

As it was eleven in the morning, Laura found Cissie, helped by a boy of eleven who was absent from school because he had a mild attack of chicken-pox, in process of giving the horses their second feed of the day. Laura stood by and watched while they measured out the feed in wooden bowls, put it in a sieve, and carried it to the mangers. Cissie glanced over her shoulder, noted that Laura was not in riding clothes, and said:

‘Shan’t be long. Take a seat.’

Laura leaned against the fence of the paddock. Out of the corner of her eye she could see old Mrs Mapsted at her wheeled pig-bin. Dame Beatrice appeared to be doing the talking, but the wind carried her voice away and Laura could not distinguish a single word. Old Mrs Mapsted was occupied in ladling potatoes from an outside copper into the pig-bin and seemed to be taking no notice at all of her visitor. In fact, as Laura turned to obtain a full view, she picked up the wooden handles of the pig-bin and trundled it away towards the sties. Dame Beatrice remained where she was.

Cissie and her helper finished feeding the horses and Cissie, rewarding the

boy, sent him off and indicated to Laura that she was ready for conversation.

‘Let’s go indoors,’ she said. ‘It’s parky out here.’

As she was dressed in khaki slacks and a sweater with holes in it, Laura could sympathize with this opinion.

‘It is parky,’ she agreed. ‘Wonder when we’ll get any rain?’

‘A peck of March dust is worth a king’s ransom,’ quoted Cissie. ‘If it isn’t a rude answer, what’s your Dame Beatrice doing over here? It’s not often *she* honours us.’

‘Pumping old Mrs M., of course,’ Laura replied. ‘Look here, Cissie, I’ve some news for you about Jenkinson.’

They went into the large stone-flagged kitchen. There was a good fire there and the flags had been well scrubbed and were brightly decorated with rugs made out of pieces.

‘The old girl’s flannel petticoats, I believe,’ commented Cissie, hitching a rug into place. ‘Take a pew. There’s nothing to drink except cocoa. I usually have a cup, and a bit of toast and dripping, when I’ve fed the nags.’

Laura accepted this refreshment, sprinkled large quantities of salt on the dripping-toast and liberally sweetened the cocoa.

‘Ages since I had grub like this,’ she said.

‘I suppose you have sherry and sweet biscuits, living with a D.B.E.,’ said Cissie. Laura laughed and bit off an enormous piece of toast.

‘No. Port wine and Parmesan cheese,’ she said. ‘Don’t be silly.’

‘What about Jenkinson?’ Cissie lowered her eyes to her plate as she asked the question. There was a pause. ‘Copped his?’ Cissie continued. ‘I somehow thought as much. He’s an old So-and-So, and has left us flat before, but he’s always come back after a couple of days, broke to the wide and crawling for an advance on his wages to go to a Seahampton pub for hair of the dog, so when he failed to show up I began to think things.’

‘Yes, I’m afraid he’s dead,’ said Laura. ‘I suppose you don’t know of anybody who might have wished it, so to speak?’

‘Nobody in particular. I mean, I could name you several people who’d had rows with him. But why should it matter?’

‘We don’t know whether it does, but the circumstances were a bit out of the ordinary, so we’re taking an all-round view. There’s been a post-mortem, of course, but we don’t know the result yet.’

‘Spill,’ said Cissie; and as though some mischievous entity had overheard the word, about a fifth of her breakfast-cup of cocoa slopped jerkily into her lap.

‘Blast!’ she said. ‘Damned hot!’ She got up to get a swab and dabbed viciously at her thighs. ‘Good thing I had these old pants on! Sorry; what were you saying?’

‘There’s been a post-mortem to see what can be established as to the cause of death. It *looked* natural enough, but his body was found among the flowers and shrubs at the Official Opening of Seahampton Grammar School.’

‘The old rip!’

‘No, no. It’s a boys’ school.’

‘There to see what he could pick up, then. Nobs about? Jewelled women and men with gold watch-chains?’

Laura shook her head.

‘Headmasters, clergymen, County Councillors — more of that type.’

‘Well, I don’t know,’ said Cissie, draining such of the cocoa as had slopped into her saucer back again into her cup. ‘Mrs Cofts is a parson’s wife, but she’s got as much jewellery as a Begum, I should imagine. And, goodness knows, she hated Jenkinson *quite* enough to do him in. What do they think it was — poison?’

‘They don’t know, but I think we can dismiss Mrs Cofts,’ said Laura quickly. ‘Who else knew him well enough to wish him further off?’

‘John, naturally. He lost a valuable mare once through Jenkinson’s lifting the elbow. She was in foal. The foal died, too.’

‘And it really was Jenkinson’s fault?’

‘Beyond a doubt.’

‘Still, it’s no good mentioning John in connection with Jenkinson’s death.’

‘Of course not. I was only giving you information.’

‘Right. Any more?’

‘I suppose you could count old Ma over there. I see the Dame’s got her nailed down at last, and that takes a bit of doing, believe you me!’

Cissie was facing the window. Laura had her back to it. She turned round in time to see Dame Beatrice, with a pig-bucket of swill in each hand, following a similarly-equipped Mrs Mapsted down the miry path to the sties.

‘Tell me more,’ said Laura. ‘These toots of Jenkinson’s. Did everybody know about them?’

‘Oh, yes, I expect so. The old swill-tub was no gentleman in his cups. Still, I will admit that he used to do most of his boozing in Seahampton.’

‘You don’t think he would have killed John in a drunken temper, do you?’

‘I shouldn’t like to say. *Could* be, I suppose, but it used to make him sick and then he’d sleep it off. And, you know, there’s been nothing to show that it wasn’t

a kick from a horse, even though I don't believe, any more than you do, that the horse was Percheron. Oh, and I've been meaning to tell you! There are rumours — I don't know who began them — that Viatka got that over-reach when Mrs Cofts, curse her, let somebody put the mare over a five-barred gate.'

'Can't imagine it. Surely she would never have demeaned herself by using a saddle some lesser fry had sat on?' Cissie laughed loudly. 'There's another thing,' she said. 'When you're looking for people who had it in for John, don't forget Farmer Grinsted.'

'Grinsted? Oh, yes. I went to enquire about a rogue stallion, and he told me he'd got Iceland Blue at stud on the other side of the Forest and took the trouble to add that the horse was as gentle as a lamb.'

'So he is. That's true enough. So is Palomino, and he knocked down Palomino to John for a song.'

'What do you call a song?'

'Ten pounds, and a florin for luck.'

'Good heavens! Tell me more.'

'After the sale, Grinsted came round and raised hell, and so John offered him back Palomino at the price he'd paid for him. You see' — she lowered her voice — 'I happen to know he was stolen property. A real bit of gipsy horse-dealing was Palomino. Grinsted got him fairly cheap, but not anything like as cheap as he sold him to John. Thing is, John got wind of the thing and threatened Grinsted with the law if he took the horse back. Grinsted was in a cleft stick. If he told the police that Palomino had been pinched he'd have the story come out from John that John was an innocent party who had bought the horse in good faith. Then Grinsted would have had to explain away his own knowledge, with the gipsy miles away by that time and probably not to be traced.'

'Oh, dear, oh, dear!' said Laura. 'What with both John and Jenkinson on the premises, I should think you must have had an exciting life,. I suppose' — she eyed Cissie keenly — 'I suppose you yourself didn't, by any chance, bump either of them off?'

'Your guess is as good as mine,' said Cissie calmly.

Dame Beatrice and old Mrs Mapsted, after what Laura would have termed a sticky start, had conferred together.

'She told me,' said the first-named at a late lunch, 'that she did not care for her son John, but that she could not imagine any reason why a horse, or, for that matter, a man, should have done him bodily harm.'

Laura mentioned the little business of Palomino and the gipsy. Dame

Beatrice nodded tolerantly. Laura added, 'And did you get anything more from the old lady?'

'Yes. She knew all about the smuggling at the airport.'

'Did she indeed? And *was* John mixed up in it?'

'She thinks he may have been, at one time, but that he had given it up some months before his death.'

'Did she say anything more about the quarrel she overheard when she was in the pig-sty?'

'Yes. It was with one of the pilots.'

'The plot thickens!'

'I doubt whether it does, you know,' said Dame Beatrice placidly. 'The quarrel had nothing to do with smuggling. It was about a horse.'

'Which horse?'

'An animal known as Appaloosa. It appears that the pilot, whose name is Hangover — pronounced Han-gouver but spelt, according to Mrs Mapsted (whose sense of humour, if acute, is also rudimentary), like the morning-after lassitude which is apt to succeed the torrid night-before—'

Laura grinned.

'I admire the old lady,' she said.

'Quite. Mr Hangover, I was about to say, was angry with John Mapsted because the horse Appaloosa won a point-to-point in which John Mapsted had insisted it stood no chance.'

'Oh, I see. By the way, did John collect heavily on the result of that point-to-point?'

'I asked Mrs Mapsted that. It appears that, far from collecting substantial winnings, her son lost money on the event, but not as much as Mr Hangover because he had not plunged nearly as heavily.'

'Then I can't see what Hangover was beefing about,' said Laura indignantly. 'At least it proved there was no funny business with the horse.'

'That remains to be proved. To employ your own idiom, there may have been wheels within wheels,' said Dame Beatrice. 'Never forget that Pegasus had wings and that Sleipnir possessed eight legs.'

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## CHAPTER TEN

### Vein Speculation

*'The water is wide,  
I cannot get o'er  
And neither have I wings to fly.  
Give me a boat that shall carry two,  
And both shall row, my love and I.'*

Old Song



‘M ONSIEUR Robert is on the telephone, madame,’ said Célestine. ‘Bless his heart,’ said Laura. ‘Dog here,’ she confided to the receiver. ‘Yes, chump, of course you can come down. Quite pleased to see you, on the whole... I said On the Whole. What? Good Lord, yes... Can’t you get here by seven?... Yes, oysters. It’s March. Yes, Cissie can fix you up with a horse. What do you take her for?... No, we can’t prove anything. It’s just a muddle. You’d think people did it on purpose... What? Yes, get themselves suspected, I mean... No, of course not. That’s just the trouble, but we’re sure they were. Yes, Dame B. as well, and the little local airport is a hive of busy-bee smugglers... No, no proof. No proof of anything!... O.K. Be seeing you at about seven.’

Detective Chief-Inspector Robert Gavin was an extremely personable young man; a young man, moreover, of charm and address. His wife was proud of him, Dame Beatrice was fond of him, Henri admired him, Célestine adored him, George respected him. Of all these tributes, the last, perhaps, was the most dazzling and the first (to Gavin himself, at any rate) the most surprising.

He arrived at ten minutes to seven and at half-past that hour he presented himself in the drawing-room of the Stone House, Wandles Parva, for sherry.

‘H’m, yes,’ said Laura, walking round him and regarding him with the eye of a connoisseur. ‘I don’t know of anybody who looks better dressed than you do. How long can you stay?’

‘Oh, three or four days unless I’m sent for. Have you fixed me up a mount?’



‘Yes, and there’s a meet at Wadshurst the day after tomorrow.’

‘Good. You coming?’

‘If my duties permit. Well, cheers.’

‘Cheers. Where’s Dame B.?’

‘Coming. She always gives us time to drink the first one without her, if you remember. Then we can start again *with* her, as from scratch.’

‘Of course. Well, what’s all this mess you’ve got yourself into? Can’t you ever leave well alone?’

‘I could, if *it* would leave *me* alone, but I’ve just happened to walk into these two things, and, of course, I had to drag Mrs Croc. in to get them sorted out. So far, however, we haven’t.’

‘You’re losing your grip, my dear girl.’

‘I don’t really think so,’ said Laura, perplexed. ‘The trouble is that we’re both perfectly certain there have been two murders, but there’s nothing to show. At least, there is, but it doesn’t hold water.’

‘What does show, besides what you’ve told me in your letters?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Well, don’t lose heart. Who are the suspects?’

‘There aren’t any, in a way, and, in a way, there are. It’s just one gosh-awful mess. Drink up. Henri’s still trying to convert us to Dubonnet. Says anything else is an insult to his cooking. But the Dame, bless her heart, stands firm, and still opts for the exports of Jerez de la Frontera.’

‘Good. Ah, here she is!’

The mistress of the house was wearing a dark-red dinner gown and looked, as Laura affectionately and disrespectfully announced, almost human. Gavin, who, since his marriage, had promoted himself to the rank of nephew-by-courtesy, took her by the elbows and kissed her yellow cheek. His adopted aunt leered at him lovingly and patted his arm as soon as he had released her.

‘And now, after dinner, for a solution of all our troubles,’ she observed. So, when dinner was over, they returned to the drawing-room for coffee, and then, when Célestine had removed herself for the last time, the three of them settled round the fire, Gavin with a cigar, Laura with cigarettes, Dame Beatrice with the Siamese cat which had lately become her familiar.

‘Now,’ said Gavin, ‘fire away.’

‘When is a murder not a murder?’ demanded Laura. I’ll tell you. (a) When a man has been kicked on the head by a horse who didn’t do it, and (b) when somebody fills a chronic drunk with something to stop him drinking — which it

did, drastically, by finishing him off.'

'Yes, I see. You told me all about that. The last I heard was that you were awaiting the result of the p.m.'

'It came through all right. The trouble is that nobody can discover who served Jenkinson the stuff, and nobody's going to confess to it now that he's died, even if no harm was intended.'

'I don't see what makes you suspect foul play in either case. You can say to a dog, "Bite him," and the chances are that if he's been trained that way he'll do as he's told; but I've never heard of training a horse to kick a man's head in. As for Jenkinson's death, couldn't it simply have been the result of a mistaken kindness, as you suggest? I agree that nobody's going to come forward and admit this, now that he's dead, but you can't rule out the supposition that somebody acted in well-intentioned ignorance, can you?'

'I wouldn't have given it another thought except that it was Jenkinson, and that somebody put his body among those flowers and things.'

'I see what you mean. Jenkinson was the man who found John Mapsted dead in the loose-box after the horse had made the noise at the wrong time. Your theory, I take it,' he added, looking at Dame Beatrice, 'is that somebody took revenge on Jenkinson because Jenkinson was responsible in some way for Mapsted's death. Isn't that about the size of it? Personally, I'd leave the whole thing alone. You'll never be able to prove anything.'

'We shall begin,' said Dame Beatrice, 'by finding out who it was who placed Jenkinson's body among the plants and flowers at the Seahampton Grammar School. Whatever else may be incapable of proof, the identity of that particular practical joker should not be very difficult to establish.'

'It wasn't a practical joke. That's what she means,' said Laura.

'My meaning is my own business,' said Dame Beatrice.

In the meantime, Mr Sebastian Bond was involved in a private investigation of the same problem.

'The police,' he said to Mr Gadd, 'are only moderately interested. They even advance the theory, which to me appears to be utter nonsense, that this man Jenkinson felt ill and, wandering into school, laid himself down among the plants and died. One would suppose that the depositions of the man Garbour would have disposed of such nonsense as that!'

'Of course, sir, no suspicion of foul play is involved,' said Mr Gadd.

'I know.' Mr Bond drummed irritably on his desk. 'I know. What I tell myself is that if foul play was not involved, something much nastier was.'

‘Sir?’ At the Seahampton Grammar School, sex, except for jokes in the masters’ Common Room, was taboo.

‘Religion,’ said Mr Bond.

‘Religion?’ Mr Gadd looked surprised. Even at School Assembly religion was also almost taboo.

‘One of those fancy faiths. There are hundreds of them about. It’s like the last days of the Roman Empire! And I’ll tell you another thing, Gadd. All this business of interplanetary travel. It’ll be a reality within a decade. If these parsons, and so forth, had any sense, they’d preach a crusade against it. Where’s it going to get them? What’s going to become of their job if we discover there’s life on Venus?’

There’s life *in* her, at any rate,’ said Mr Gadd involuntarily, ignoring the jungle *fetich*.

‘I was speaking seriously,’ said Mr Bond. ‘I wouldn’t put it past some sect—there’s so much wrong thinking since these evangelists have discovered the virtues (sic) of modern methods of advertising — to have worked out this “say it with flowers” business according to some extraordinary beliefs of their own. Why flowers at a funeral, anyway? You and I know, of course, the psychology which lies behind it. It cheers up the mourners and makes what is horrible and desperate, and, in a word, unbearable, into something sentimental and unreal. Yet there are people — 100 per cent, among the semi-educated classes, I imagine — who really think they are bestowing the flowers on the dead.’

‘Yes?’ said Mr Gadd, who had heard all this a good many times before and could not see, in the present instance, what it was leading up to.

‘Well, if he didn’t put himself among our plants of his wilful act — and I don’t believe he could have done — how did he get there? That’s what we’ve got to find out.’

‘Why?’ thought Mr Gadd; but he knew better than to ask this aloud. ‘How do you think we should set about things?’ he enquired.

‘Staff meeting? No — at any rate, not yet. I’ve questioned all the caretakers, both separately and together, and I’m convinced they know nothing about it. No. We’ve got to keep our eyes and ears open, especially for chance remarks let fall by the boys. There was *something* behind that business, mark my words, and that something was very unhealthy — *how* unhealthy is debatable.’

The vexed question of the body among the flowers had been debated by the police and the Chief Constable. The local Superintendent’s view that it was ‘all of a piece with what boys at the Grammar School get up to’ was not shared by

Sir Mallory Thomas. He had three sons of his own. To be sure, they were at public schools, but he did not believe that there was all that much difference 'twixt Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

'Boys wouldn't touch a dead body. Superstitious as Tom Sawyer,' he averred.

'But if it wasn't done by the boys, sir, as being their idea of a joke, like, who *was* it done by?' argued the Superintendent. 'The body, according to the evidence given at the inquest, had been dead for at least eight hours when it was examined at the mortuary.'

'Got to find out where it was hidden all those hours,' said the Chief Constable. 'Foul play or no foul play, the whole thing is outside my experience. There's no *point* in the business; that's what's so fascinating.'

'I can't spare men to investigate a mare's nest, sir,' said the Superintendent firmly. 'If we could show evidence of murder it would be a different matter. But in Seahampton nowadays, why, the traffic controls alone at the juncture of North Slope with the High Street—'

'I'll go and see the headmaster again,' said Sir Mallory. 'Matter of interest. I agree you can't put men on the job unless we suspect crime. This seems, on the face of it, mere freakishness. All right. But I *still* want to know where they hid it. It's so extraordinary that I suspect it of being a blind. Now, why do people draw blinds, eh, Superintendent?'

'In the interests of decency,' said the Superintendent, permitting himself to grin. The Chief Constable studied him for a moment and then nodded.

'Good,' he said cordially. 'And what about the blind that bus-drivers draw at night?'

'Saves getting a reflection on the windscreen, I suppose, sir.'

'And in those two answers, or in one or other of them, lies the clue we need,' said the Chief Constable. 'Oh, well, Superintendent, you look after the traffic controls and I'll look after the corpses.'

The Superintendent was not amused.

'Seahampton has a very good record for street accidents,' he said stiffly. The Chief Constable opened his eyes wider, and said at once:

'You may have got something there! See whether you can find out about this man Jenkinson being nearly run down or something. He may have died of heart failure, assisted by that anti-alcohol stuff.'

'The hospital would have notified us, sir.'

'Not if the chap who did it bundled the body into the back of his car in a panic and didn't report it. If it had been reported there'd be no mystery! I suggest

you tell your men to make a routine check. The chap who moved the body must be someone who knows the neighbourhood, otherwise he wouldn't have chosen the Grammar School hall. He must have known about the function there that evening, too, and picked his time. Check with the chief caretaker at the school. He managed the car parking in the school grounds that night. Find out all the people who came by car, and let me have a list. I'll do the rest myself. It's not as though it's an ordinary police investigation. I simply want to *know*.'

The whole question boils down to this,' said the headmaster, addressing Sir Mallory. '*When* could it have been done? The answer,' he went on, lifting his hand to prevent the Chief Constable from speaking, 'is that it must have been done between the end of afternoon school and the beginning of the official Opening. And yet'—a worried frown replaced the professionally benevolent gaze of the pedagogue—'I still can't see when there was the opportunity. There was certainly no body in the hall when it was locked at two p.m., and from then onwards it remained locked until half-past six. From half-past six until the ceremony began I do not see how there could have been any opportunity. I shouldn't think the hall was left entirely empty for a moment.'

'I should be glad of a word with your chief caretaker, Mr. Bond. You state that he was in charge of the parking arrangements that evening.'

'Quite so. Your own view, I take it, is that the body was brought by car and was introduced into the hall after the ceremony was over? Wait a moment, though! I'm not at all sure that that will do. It would depend upon when the plants and flowers were rearranged. But see the caretaker by all means. I doubt whether he can help you very much.'

The chief caretaker—thorough man!—produced his parking list. (One job less for the Superintendent, thought Sir Mallory.)

'I marked out a plan on the asphalt,' the caretaker explained, 'being that it would be dark when they wanted their cars to go home, and some of them not being used to the layout here. So, as they parks, I takes their name and the number of the car, and it's all wrote down here, sir, to expedite getting them away after the ceremony and refreshments.'

'Some job to check all these cars,' thought Sir Mallory, thankful that it was one which he had already delegated. 'May I keep this?' he asked. 'You'll have heard, of course, about the body that was found here after the ceremony.'

'Saw it, too, sir. But I'll swear it wasn't there when I popped my head in as soon as I unlocked at half-past five, sir.'

'You mean at half-past six, don't you? Mr Bond—'

‘I unlocked at half-past five, sir, to take a last look round, it being too late at half-past six, with people and boys arriving.’

‘Mr Bond seemed certain that the hall was locked from two until half-past six.’

‘The school, sir,’ said the caretaker firmly, ‘is, as I see it, my responsibility when the building is vacated as for immediate school use, and, whether known, or, as in this case, unknown to Mr Bond, I make it a practice to look into anything that’s been locked up. If you had my experience of boys, sir—let alone Science masters — you would appreciate that the same is absolutely necessary in a building of this sort. Taps left running, electric lights left on, lavatory cisterns running over, Bunsen burners left alight, vomit what’s never been reported, ground-floor windows left wide open — you wouldn’t believe! I’ve had it all in my time, let alone boys locked in the gymnasium changing rooms by mistake through taking showers at illicit times, and one of the women cleaners getting herself shut in the biology lab. cupboard with the skeleton and screeching herself silly when the lock jammed.’

‘How long did you leave the hall doors open from half-past five, then?’ asked Sir Mallory, hastily re-forming his ideas.

‘Let’s see, now. Half-past five I unlocks and has a look round. All serene, except the piano wants dusting. The women have all gone. Knock off at five, they do, after sweeping the classrooms. Collins, that’s my second in command, is putting down tea-leaves and sand in the lower corridor and the other three is having a last tidy-up round the gardens and quad.’

‘Wasn’t it rather dark for that?’

‘Sunset at 6.7 p.m., sir, if you remember.’ He produced a small diary which supplied the printed information. ‘They could manage all right. We didn’t want any workmen’s clutter in odd holes and corners, not with the County Surveyor coming along.’

‘I see. We can take it, then, that when you looked in at five-thirty the plants and flowers had not been moved.’

The caretaker looked at him woodenly.

‘As, until that moment, sir, I had not had the advantage of observing the arrangement of plants and flowers, the headmaster having deputed one of his prefects to lock the hall, it’s hard to say what had been altered and what had not. All I say is that I’m certain there wasn’t no corpse.’

‘I think we may take it for granted that nothing had been moved up to that time. Now, then: how long was the hall left unlocked and who, besides yourself,

knew that it was unlocked?’

‘As I was saying, sir, the women cleaners had gone home, the other caretakers was otherwise engaged upon their duties and the piano needed dusting. I goes off, therefore, to procure a duster...’

‘Where from?’

‘The woodwork shop, sir, it being a sight nearer the hall than the brooms and brushes cupboard which is out by the canteen exit.’

‘How long...?’

‘Call it near enough twenty minutes, because on me way I spots a light left on in the flat.’

‘The flat is on the way to the woodwork shop, I take it?’

‘No, sir. I spots the light from acrorst the quad.’

‘But what took twenty minutes?’

‘Clearing up the mess in the flat, sir, which me and the cleaner had words about in the morning, her swearing black’s white as she left everything in order and me averring what I do know to be the truth, viz., that there was a heap of wood-shavings disposed of very untidy underneath the kitchen sink.’

‘Who is in charge of the flat?’

‘Young Mr Turnbull, same as he is of the woodwork shop.’

‘Ah, yes, the master whose duster you had gone to borrow.’

‘As though,’ continued the caretaker aggrievedly, ‘it wasn’t enough trouble with never being able to get in there after school in the ordinary way, with him and that young Mr Spencer havin’ of their tea and playin’ cards!’

‘Perhaps I had better have a word with Mr Turnbull,’ said Mr Mallory, glancing at the headmaster. Mr Bond nodded and the caretaker went off on the errand. Mr Turnbull, a full-faced young man with hairy hands, looked truculent.

‘Is it your practice to sweep wood-shavings underneath the sink in the school flat?’ asked Sir Mallory.

‘Sometimes. Why not? It’s the cleaner’s job to clean up.’

‘She says she does, but the caretaker doesn’t believe her.’

‘If you knew,’ said Mr Turnbull furiously, ‘the state in which I sometimes find my workshop in the morning, you wouldn’t believe either the cleaner *or* the caretaker.’

‘Just so. May I ask whether you were still on the building at half-past five on that Opening evening?’

Mr Turnbull stared at his inquisitor.

‘What the devil does it matter?’ he demanded nervously.

‘Only to this extent. Between half-past five, when, on the caretaker’s own admission, the hall was unlocked without Mr Bond’s knowledge, and half-past six, when the hall was officially, so to speak, unlocked, a dead body was inserted. Now, the only time when this could have been done was while the caretaker was getting into the flat, cleaning it, and then looking for your duster. It appears that if he found himself in immediate need of such an article, he was in the habit of procuring it from the woodwork shop.’

‘Blasted cheek!’

The point is, Mr Turnbull, who would have known of this habit of his?’

‘Not me, certainly.’

‘And, at the time, you were—?’

‘Can’t remember. Somewhere on the building, I expect. Most of us would have been smoking and talking until six. Cleaned up, then, and went on duty.’

‘Your duty being—?’

‘Chivvyng parents into seats and making certain that none of them sat in the reserved rows in the front.’

‘Will you tell me in detail how you spent the time between half-past five and six? Were you, for example, playing cards?’

‘Good Lord, no! Half an hour isn’t any good for playing cards. I should have had to keep one eye on the clock all the time.’

‘Well, what *were* you doing?’

‘Finishing my tea and talking to various people.’

‘In the staff Common Room?’

‘No. I’m not considered good enough to hob-nob with Masters of Arts.’

‘Come, come, Turnbull!’ said Mr Bond. ‘That is an unnecessary comment. If you have no information to give, I am sure Sir Mallory will excuse you.’

Turnbull took himself off. ‘I had no idea,’ said Mr Bond peevishly, ‘that the caretaker was in the habit of borrowing the masters’ dusters. He has no right to do so. He is well supplied with items for cleaning. In any case, why should he require a duster at all? The women cleaners see to all that sort of thing. I do not credit this story of dusting the piano. But, tell me, is it in order for me to enquire into the pertinence of this introduction of dusters as a *leit-motif*?’

‘Certainly. We have to find out where the body was hidden before it was introduced into the hall.’

‘A duster would scarcely serve to screen it from view!’

Sir Mallory smiled non-committally.

‘You see,’ he said, ‘between ourselves, I feel that your caretaker must be



involved. He unlocked the hall (which you yourself had had locked and which you fully expected to remain locked) at an hour when it was pretty certain he would not be seen to do this. The school cleaners had gone home, the other caretakers were engaged upon tasks which he himself had set them, you and your staff were in the masters' Common Room except for those who had gone home for tea, and, apparently, Mr Turnbull—'

'Yes, but that tea-break was an elastic hour, and why should anyone here know anything about this man Jenkinson? Wandless Parva, where he was employed, is fifteen miles away!'

'Jenkinson had contacts in Seahampton. I suppose,' said Sir Mallory suddenly, 'your caretaker hasn't a brother who owns a boat?'

'I know nothing of his private affairs.'

'How long has he been here?'

'He was appointed two years ago. Although the school was officially opened this year, we have been running, surrounded by workmen and their paraphernalia, since 1951.'

'He came straight into the job from outside, then?'

'Yes, but with excellent references.'

'Quite, quite.'

'What I don't understand,' said Mr Bond, 'is that, if he is in any way involved in this curious business, he should confess that he *did* unlock the hall and go to find Turnbull's duster.'

'Better to confess than be found out,' Sir Mallory observed.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### Horses Go Visiting

*‘A general impression appeared to prevail that it shewed a great fault somewhere that the fates had not arranged for some less valuable cranium to receive the blow.’*

William Cycles



SIR Mallory had been invited to dinner at the Stone House. ‘You see,’ he said, appraising Dame Beatrice’s sherry and taking another sip, ‘it’s all very difficult. I don’t suppose it’s a criminal offence to put a body amongst somebody else’s flowers. I can’t get anything more out of this man Betters, the caretaker. He won’t agree that he should not have unlocked the hall before half-past six. Reiterates that he always has a last look-round before all school functions and adds darkly that I “don’t know Mr Bond. Put a peck of dust under his nose and he’d never see it.” I retorted that dust was not Mr Bond’s business, but the man simply looked righteous and said he took his duties seriously.’

‘You know, what worries me about this Jenkinson business is that it was so bizarre and unnecessary to “plant” the body in that extraordinary place,’ said Gavin. ‘Surely, the person who is responsible for his death would have been much safer if he had left him where he fell? What sort of mentality causes a man to make a mock funeral like that? It seems insane, unless—’

‘Yes?’ said Sir Mallory.

‘Dinner is served,’ said Célestine, from the doorway.

‘What were you going to say?’ asked Sir Mallory when they had taken their places at table.

‘Only this: couldn’t it have been a joke? — not a very kindly one, it’s true — but may not somebody who didn’t like him much have filled him up with whisky, or whatever his tipple is, and then have shot the anti-drink stuff into his glass, thinking that he’d come round later with a nasty taste in his mouth?’

‘It would explain a lot,’ Sir Mallory agreed.

‘It would explain still more if somebody did it who didn’t much like Mr Bond, either,’ said Laura. ‘Imagine the situation at the school Official Opening if Jenkinson had got up in the middle of Dame Beatrice’s address or the parson’s violin solo!’

Sir Mallory considered this remark earnestly — a reaction which Laura had not expected.

‘The trouble about *that* is, that it suggests a boyish prank,’ he said. ‘But Mr Bond, who strikes me as a pretty sound type, does not connect it with his boys. I think he would know. Good headmasters have a sixth sense about these things. If he says he doesn’t connect it with the school, I should say he’s right.’

‘There’s such a thing as not *wanting* such a connection to be made,’ said Gavin, who took a wary attitude towards what appeared to be virtue. But Dame Beatrice said crisply:

‘Mr Bond is an honourable man.’

This dreadful statement was received in dead silence by the gentlemen and with an incredulous giggle by the uninhibited Célestine, who then retired hastily. Laura said pointedly:

‘That brings us back to the masters.’

‘Back?’ Sir Mallory looked surprised.

‘Well, *to* them, then.’

Dame Beatrice, accustomed to the workings of minds more subtle and less ingenuous than Laura’s, asked, almost sharply:

‘So you’d thought of one of the *masters* in connection with this extraordinary lying-in-state, had you, child?’

‘Not until now,’ said Laura hastily.

At this moment the telephone rang and Célestine came back to announce that the call was for Gavin.

‘Damnation!’ said the gentleman. ‘That means the last of my leave.’

‘Melancholy but true,’ reported Laura a few minutes later. ‘He’s got to go back tomorrow morning.’

‘In that case,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘he and I will drive to London together. You take the day for yourself, but please do not get into mischief.’

So, on the following morning, Laura waved the two of them good-bye and went to the garage to get out her latest toy, a motor-scooter. In five minutes she was out on the Seahampton road.

Seahampton was a deceptive and interesting town. It had grown considerably since the end of the First World War, and its two distinct parts had no connection

with one another. New Seahampton with its factories, housing estates and modern residential area of bungalows and four-bedroom houses, contrasted oddly with the original village on the creek.

Old Seahampton was a jumbled collection of houses large and small. It had its own public-house, a Saxon church and a sea wall round part of the harbour. It was a place of yachts and yachtsmen, boats and boatmen, and it stood on a creek which dog-legged its course from Seahampton to the Sound. Between the church and the jetty was a house which stood on a point of land so that it was three-quarters surrounded by water. Laura, who visited Old Seahampton often in the summer, because she liked the place and frequently hired a boat there, had always been intrigued by this house. She had never seen anybody enter or leave it, although there had been long days in the summer when she had spent hours fishing from the sea wall and had picnicked there without leaving the spot except for a drink at the inn, the Blue Finn.

On this particular day she reached Old Seahampton at a time when lunch was 'on' at the Blue Finn. She went into the low-beamed dining-room and there she ate soup, roast pork and Dutch apple-tart. Then she looked about her with interest. There was a romantic, troubadour streak in Laura which demanded excitement. At the Blue Finn, however, the company appeared to consist of two men in tweeds, a woman with a Sealyham, a youth of about nineteen who was smoking a pipe for (Laura decided) the first time, and two middle-aged women in corduroy slacks. Of anything sinister or in any way interesting there was no sign whatsoever. It was her intention, when she had finished her after-lunch cigarette, to go into New Seahampton and take a look at the school, although what was to be gained by this she had not the least idea. As she sat in the window-seat smoking and looking out over the harbour she saw a gipsy bring round a couple of horses. She recognised them at once as Criollo and Appaloosa from the Elkstonehunt stables.

'Now what?' thought Laura, studying the set-up with interest. The horses were taken charge of by the potman of the inn, as though this was a normal and oft-repeated procedure, and the gipsy went into the public bar, so that Laura lost sight of him immediately.

The familiar feeling of detective fever swept over her. She finished her drink and strolled out into the sunshine. There were very few people about. The most noticeable was an artist who was making a charcoal sketch of the harbour preparatory to committing himself to oils. He had not been there when Laura had gone into the Blue Finn, and she had scarcely done more than stroll over for a

cursory and surreptitious glance at his sketch when the gipsy came out of the inn and walked towards them.

Laura deemed that his business, if he had any, was with the artist, but he caught up with her as she walked away and said:

‘Lady, you want to buy a couple of ponies out of the Forest, cheap?’

‘No, thanks,’ said Laura.

‘I’ll let you have them dirt cheap, lady. Give me a five-pound note and they’re yours. Make lovely presents for your sister’s children, lady.’

‘I’m not in the market for ponies; I haven’t a sister and I haven’t five pounds to spare,’ announced Laura firmly. ‘Please go away.’

‘You want a ride in a boat, then?’

‘No. Go away.’

‘I hire you a nice horse. Go pretty well. All round the harbour for five bob. Come on, lady. Do me a favour. It’ll bring you luck. You’ve got a lucky face, lady.’

‘Where’s the horse?’

‘You can have your pick, lady. Right here in the stable of this pub. You come with me.’

‘Not so. You bring the nags out here where I can see them properly. I know that stable. It’s as black as night.’ She had no intention of being taken for a ride, either actually or metaphorically, but the situation was intriguing and she hoped to learn something from it. The gipsy took a cigarette stub from behind his ear, glanced at it, lit it and swaggered away. The artist left his sketch and came over to Laura.

‘Is that chap annoying you?’ he asked.

‘Not particularly. He wants to sell me ponies and take me for rides in boats and hire me a horse. I’ve settled for the horse.’

‘I should be a bit wary if I were you. He’s up to N.B.G., I fancy.’

‘I’m pretty sure of it,’ said Laura, uncertain whether to confide the fact that she had recognized the horses. Discretion — never Laura’s strongest characteristic — almost lost the day, but there was something so intriguing about the fact that these horses from Elkstonehunt had turned up at the Blue Finn that she put her lips together, turned to look at the inn, and added: ‘Here he comes again, anyway.’ She strolled towards the gipsy, who was leading the grey mare Appaloosa. Criollo, the strawberry roan, followed behind like a dog.

Laura’s one fear was that it would be obvious to the gipsy that the horses recognized her. She took sugar from her pocket and hoped that their response to

this gesture would appear to account sufficiently for their friendliness.

‘You like horses, lady?’ The gipsy eyed the sugar.

‘Oh, yes. I like all animals.’ Laura stroked Criollo’s muzzle. ‘I’ll have this one. It seems friendly. Oh’ — she glanced down at her tweeds and brogues — ‘I can’t ride in these clothes. Sorry. Another time, perhaps.’

The gipsy kicked at a root of grass. (The land between the church and the sea wall was a small open common.) Laura took half-a-crown from the pocket in which she carried a little loose change. The gipsy spat on the ground as she offered it, turned away and walked back towards the inn. The horses went with him.

The whole episode held the fascination of sheer mystery. Laura could make nothing of it. Then, on the small jetty used by yachtsmen she spotted a man who sometimes crewed for her in yacht-racing. She waved to him. He responded, and they joined forces for a drink. The Blue Finn was still open.

As they went into the saloon bar, a low-ceilinged little room with a bow window which overlooked the harbour, Laura saw, out of the tail of her eye, the gipsy leaving the inn. She turned and stared at his retreating back. He had come from the direction of the stables and was hurrying towards the broad path, flooded at full tide, which followed the curve of the harbour. He passed the Yacht Club, a moored sea-going cruiser of considerable size but very old-fashioned design, and in a minute was out of sight behind some cottages whose high door-sills were almost at the edge of the water.

‘What’s eating you?’ enquired her companion.

‘Nothing much,’ she answered. ‘Look here, do you mind if I ’phone before we have our drinks?’

‘Go ahead. What shall I order for you?’

‘Half of draught bitter, please.’

She had often telephoned from the Blue Finn. This time she rang up Cissie Gauberon.

‘Speaking,’ said Cissie.

‘Well, do you know that a gipsy is over here at Seahampton with Criollo and Appaloosa?’

‘A gipsy? Oh, you mean Zozo.’

‘Do I? As long as it’s all right.’

‘Quite all right, but thanks for ringing. Where exactly are you speaking from?’

‘The pub here.’

‘Oh, I see. Don’t mix sherry with champagne. Bye-bye.’

Laura rang off, returned to the bar and drank beer thoughtfully.

‘Something on your mind?’ asked her escort.

‘Yes. Have another with me. Same again, William, please. Can’t tell you now. I’ve got my scooter thing stabled here. It’s got a pillion seat. Can I give you a lift anywhere when we leave here?’

‘No, thanks. Well, cheers. Cigarette?’

‘Thank you. I suppose you see a lot of what goes on in this remote spot?’

‘On and off. What’s on your mind?’

‘Smuggling. I suppose this place was once a smugglers’ haunt,’ she added, addressing the barman.

‘Smugglers? Bless you, yes. Haven’t you never seen our cellars? Made specially for the Gentlemen, as they used to call ’em. Brandy and silk across the Channel from France, you know. Don’t need to touch Seahampton to put in here. Oh, yes, they used to slip up this creek and put the stuff in the cellars till it was a good night to bring the horses—’

‘Horses? Oh, yes,’ said Laura, with the smoothness of an actress taking a cue, ‘the stables here are pretty big, too. You’ve got room for half-a-dozen horses, I suppose?’

‘Nearer a dozen. The stables is bigger nor the house itself, I reckon.’

‘I suppose they’re not much used nowadays,’ suggested Laura disingenuously.

The barman wagged his head.

‘Off and on, you know. Off and on,’ he answered, avoiding her eye and swabbing swipes off the counter. Laura finished her beer and she and her cavalier departed, took leave of one another and went their separate ways, he to the Yacht Club, she to follow the gipsy to find out, if she could, where he was going and what he was up to.

The path she was following was badly surfaced and was never, owing to the high tides, quite dry. It was at a very moderate pace, therefore, that she rode her motor-scooter round the edge of the basin. The harbour, which was a natural one and possessed neither bar nor mole, was shaped rather like a large figure eight with an extremely broad waist and with an unfinished top loop which meandered out to the Sound.

She passed the row of cottages which had screened the gipsy from her view and then came in sight of him. He was some distance in front of her, so she rode a little closer and then parked the motor-scooter on a bit of waste-ground and

followed on foot. He was cutting out a fast pace, faster than she had realised. She began to trot, slipping sometimes on the mud which the retreating tide had left behind it, and not gaining very much ground.

At the curve which formed the bottom of the figure eight, as the harbour verge swung away to the right, the man altered course and ceased to follow the line of the shallow water. He bore to the left, where a lane led away from the sea to the high road into Southampton.

Laura followed like a leopard stalking prey. Her fear was lest the gipsy should glance behind him, for the lane was fairly straight and the hedges were cut well back, so that there was no chance of slipping into cover.

Fortunately, he seemed to be so intent on his own business and so anxious to pursue it at top speed that he did not once look back, but maintained a wolf's deceptive pace until he reached the highway. There he slowed to cross the road, obviously heading for the bus-stop. Laura turned tail and walked back by the way she had come, slowing down occasionally as though in contemplation of the beauties of what had turned out to be a particularly delightful spring afternoon. The gipsy must certainly be given no reason to suppose that she had been keeping him under observation.

As soon as she was back beside the harbour she tore to the waste ground on which she had left her motor-scooter. The tide had turned, but there was plenty of time before it covered the path. She mounted and rode to the bus-stop. The gipsy was still there, but, even as she was hoping that he would not recognize her in her crash-helmet — for she had been bare-headed during their previous conversation and he had not seen her with her motor-scooter — the bus came and he signalled it and climbed on board. Laura shot past while he was mounting to the top deck, remained ahead of the bus for about a mile and then turned off into a lane. The bus went by. She swung her machine round and followed it at a safe distance into Southampton. The gipsy did not get off, and the bus turned into the bus station. Laura pulled up and waited. There were a great many buses and there were streams of people. In the crowd she missed seeing him. She hung about for ten minutes and then returned to the Blue Finn. It was the stabling that she proposed to visit this time, to see whether the horses were still there.



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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Exploration of Avenues

*‘I pray you greet well my horse and pray him to give you four of his years to help you withal; and I will at my coming home give him four of my years and four horse loaves till amends. Tell him that I prayed him so.’*

Thomas Betson



DAME Beatrice, after all, had not gone to London with Gavin. ‘The most interesting point that emerged at the inquest,’ she said to Sir Mallory, who had come again and whom she was entertaining to lunch, ‘is the discrepancy between Miss Gauberon’s evidence and that of Mrs Mapsted.’

‘Quite. How fortunate you are in your cook. I have always understood and sympathized with Bertie Wooster’s aunt, Mrs Travers, when she conspired to relieve the Bingo Little household of the services of the cook Anatole.’

‘I hope you’re not conspiring to relieve me of the services of the cook Henri,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Are you so much immersed in the pleasures of the table that you haven’t listened to what I was saying?’

‘I heard every syllable. And, of course, I do agree with you. Whether Mapsted’s death was an accident — and it was, if we accept the verdict given at the inquest — or whether, as we suspect, it was contrived, it certainly is interesting that apparently the poor chap was in two places at once on the evening of his death.’

‘You speak in self-satisfied tones. Am I to understand that you have solved that particular mystery?’

‘Indeed, yes. Or, rather, the Superintendent has. There is unimpeachable evidence that Mapsted *was* at Seahampton that evening. He went there on business of some sort, according to the landlord of the Blue Finn, but what that business was the fellow seems not to know.’

‘I am not at all sure that I should believe the landlord. Are there any other details?’

‘Not really. Mapsted had lunch at the pub with a man the landlord hadn’t seen before, and went off with this fellow at about two o’clock. He came back without him at seven or thereabouts, got the barmaid to fix him up with ham sandwiches, drank a pint of stout and left at eight.’

‘Possibly to return to Elkstonehunt, don’t you think? How did he travel to Seahampton? Do you know that?’

‘Not on a horse, according to the landlord. The Superintendent made rather a point of that, because they’ve still got plenty of stabling at the Blue Finn. He made the journey in his own old car. It’s of no particular account, as far as I can see, except — yes, I see what you mean. He could have been home, even in that old crock of his, inside half an hour.’

‘Therefore old Mrs Mapsted could have been telling the truth when she declared that she left her son downstairs at half-past nine that night.’

‘Equally, then,’ argued Sir Mallory, ‘Miss Gauberon could have been right when she told about the telephone call from Seahampton. He could have left the house as soon as his mother went upstairs, gone back to Seahampton in the car and telephoned from there to say he was not coming home.’

‘Or from anywhere else.’

‘Eh? — Oh, I see what you mean. Well, a bachelor can please himself about that sort of thing, I suppose, although I shouldn’t really have thought he was the type. Anyway, if it *was* Seahampton, it’s really rather interesting when one comes to think of Jenkinson’s body having been found at the school there. There must be a tie-up somewhere, but — you see it’s all so *pointless* unless both men were murdered.’

‘I am acting on the assumption that they *were* both murdered. Although it is likely that Jenkinson’s death was not foreseen, it does not do to burke the possibilities.’

‘But there’s no evidence beyond the peculiar business of putting Jenkinson’s body among those flowers and plants, and even *that* is only evidence of some sort of mental derangement.’

‘“A nice derangement of epitaphs,”’ said Dame Beatrice, with a grim cackle.

‘Well, I’ve been taking thought, and putting two and two together, and I’m pretty sure I know who administered the tetraethyl-thiuram-disulphide, or, at any rate, caused this to be done and supervised the doing,’ said the Chief Constable.

‘Really? That is interesting. What have you to go on?’

‘What the incomparable Jeeves called “the psychology of the individual.” A

great many actions carry the stamp of an individual personality, and, to the student of human nature, can provide a clue to identity in the same way as a writer's style can speak a name to an informed and critical reader. Don't you agree?'

'Indubitably. And you conclude —?'

'That the mind which conceived the idea of teaching Jenkinson a lesson, if not of actually killing him, could belong only to old Mrs Mapsted. What do you say to that?'

'I congratulate you upon your insight. In a woman it would be fobbed off as intuition, would it not?'

'Don't you agree with me, then?'

'Psychologically speaking, undoubtedly you are right, but there may have been other factors, don't you think? Tell me, has anything more been found out about smuggling at the airport?'

'We've held a watching brief, but there's been nothing suspicious. I imagine the tip-off was given and therefore that operations, if there *were* any, have been suspended for the time being. What are you telling me about old Mrs Mapsted? Don't you think she did administer that stuff to Jenkinson?'

'If she did, you will never prove it. I am certain of that. Even if she admits that she administered the tetraethyl-thiuram-disulphide, you won't be able to show that she did so in the hope that the result would be Jenkinson's death. For one thing, it is an unreliable substance. One couldn't be *certain* of the effect in the way one could of prussic acid, for example, or belladonna or even our old friend arsenic, although a resistance to the latter can be acquired if one takes precautions. If she chose to say, and adhered to it, that she intended nothing but good to Jenkinson, known to her as a confirmed alcoholic, and had no idea that she might have killed him, you could not touch her. There is only one thing that might shake her resolution.'

'What's that?'

'There is a readily available and very inexpensive treatise on psychiatry which gives information about the possible effects of tetraethyl-thiuram-disulphide. If it could be shown that she had read the book, it might be possible to force a confession from her, but I doubt it.'

'She'd retract it,' said Sir Mallory, 'and any defending counsel would get the accusation laughed out of court. Personally, I wouldn't even risk arresting her, especially on the strength of what you've just said. Mind you, granted that my surmise is correct, she may have definite knowledge that Jenkinson was

responsible for John Mapsted's death.'

'We have only Jenkinson's word for it that there was blood on the stable floor and on the horse's hoof. On the other hand, I don't see at present what Jenkinson had to gain by killing Mapsted, and he certainly had no reason for blaming Percheron if the horse was not guilty.'

'How do you mean?' asked Sir Mallory.

'Percheron, but for his uncertain temper, is a very good horse. Somebody might have been willing to risk the temper if he could buy the horse cheap. Again, it might be to someone's advantage to get the horse destroyed on the plea that he had proved to be a killer. Either of these theories would lead away from Jenkinson. After all, Percheron isn't his horse. What about Miss Gauberon?'

'I'd thought of Miss Gauberon, too. She is mistress of the Elkstonehunt stables now.'

'I know. But it seems as though they are more or less of a white elephant unless she can get more capital. Did you know that she had asked Laura to go into partnership there?'

'Yes. Gavin told me his wife had received that offer. I think she showed good sense in refusing it. Well, now, what do we do about Mrs Mapsted? I can't say I fancy the idea of bullyragging the poor old lady.'

'You can leave her to me, if you like. I am likely to get more out of her, if it is there to be obtained, than a policeman would. By the way, if the question does not embarrass you, why do you invariably refer to the Seahampton Superintendent as that, and never mention his name?'

'Because his name's Humblederry, and, before he was introduced, the late High Sheriff, who writes the most vile hand I've ever had to try to decipher, sent me a letter about him. All I could make of the Superintendent's name was Rumblebelly. I felt that this was unlikely, and it set up a complex in me, so now I call him Superintendent to everybody, including himself when I address him. It is better so.'

'Let's have coffee in the next room,' said Dame Beatrice. 'I have a fine Jamaica rum I should like you to try.'

'That chap Grinsted, whom I do *not* like,' said Sir Mallory a little later, 'has a theory to account for Mapsted's death, but I can't say I think much of it.'

'Yes, he gave it to Laura. *She* did not give it credence, either. Besides, it does not dispose of the main difficulty.'

'How do you mean?'

'That Percheron made all his fuss seven hours or so after John Mapsted was

killed.'

'I know.'

'That is why I am perfectly certain it was murder.'

'And I am equally certain that Jenkinson knew something about it and it *could* have been he who put the body into Percheron's stable.'

'Yes, that all hangs together. And Mrs Mapsted, you think, blamed Jenkinson for her son's death and revenged herself on him. Be that as it may — and we've agreed we're unlikely to get to the bottom of it — there are one or two further difficulties which may or may not be important. For instance, there is the ambiguous position of Miss Merial Trowse.'

'Oh, I wasn't thinking of her. I was thinking of that small syndicate in Lymington who own a horse called Ancreon. There's something fishy there, I think. The Lymington police are keeping an eye skinned. What about Miss Trowse?'

'According to Laura, Miss Trowse denies that there was anything in the rumour that she was to marry John Mapsted. There is no reason at present to suppose that the point has any importance in itself, but it is interesting as showing another discrepancy. It seems curious that she should deny that there was an understanding that they were to marry unless she had guilty knowledge of his death. After all, to ask for her hand is still the greatest compliment a man can pay a woman. One would have thought—'

'Yes, I see what you mean. Did Mapsted leave a will?'

'I did not hear of one. If he did not, I suppose Mrs Mapsted and Miss Gauberon would carry on the place as before.'

'Is there anything else you know, or surmise?'

'No. I cannot help wondering, though, about Mrs Cofts and the mare Viatka. You know she lamed the animal?'

'What's strange about that?'

'Probably nothing.'

'It couldn't have any bearing on these two deaths.'

'Probably not, but it is an interesting little mystery, none the less. And there is another interesting little mystery, too.'

'Oh?'

'The Elkstonehunt horses, including the three ponies, number twelve.'

'Yes?'

'Percheron and three others are never let out on hire. Laura has often remarked on it.'

‘We know about Percheron. Who are the other three?’

‘A chestnut named Tennessee, a strawberry roan named Criollo and a grey named Appaloosa.’

‘I suppose they haven’t yet been schooled to hacking.’

‘They have been at the stables for the past two years, and, according to Laura, they are not hacks but racehorses.’

‘Hm! It *does* sound a bit odd. What do you make of it?’

‘I don’t make anything of it. I merely mention that it has a certain amount of mystery about it. Of course, Laura may be wrong. It is from her that I received the information that they are never let out on hire.’

‘I don’t think she would be wrong about a thing like that,’ said Sir Mallory thoughtfully. ‘But still, as I say, it couldn’t have anything to do with Mapsted’s death, or Jenkinson’s, either. I’d like to know more about old Mrs Mapsted and our friend the chemical compound, though. Do find out what you can.’

He went off soon after that, and Dame Beatrice, acting on impulse, walked over to the Elkstonehunt stables. She found Cissie Gauberon entangled with Miss Temme and the May children.

‘You can have Basuto and Connemara,’ she was saying, ‘but you can’t have Shan. He’s got a cough.’

‘Shan’s the only decent pony you’ve got,’ said Ursula. ‘If I can’t have him you’ll have to let me have a real horse. Why can’t I have Mustang?’

‘He’s Mrs Gavin’s horse.’

‘But she isn’t riding today. She went off on her motor-scooter. We saw her. *Why* can’t I have Mustang?’

‘Because you can’t,’ said Miss Temme. ‘He’s much too high in the leg for you. Wait until you’re older.’

‘Then I’ll have Barb.’

‘I want Barb,’ said Dick. ‘He’s my beautiful Arab steed. “Fret not to roam the desert now with all thy winged speed. I may not mount on thee again. Thou’rt sold, my Arab steed.” ’

‘Gah!’ retorted Ursula.

‘That’s enough,’ said Miss Temme.

‘You’d better toss for it,’ said Cissie wearily. ‘Anyway, Sarah gets Connemara, as usual. That’s *one* settled.’

At last the party was mounted, and Cissie herself took Jennet with the intention of escorting the children. For the first time she became aware of Dame Beatrice and reined in.

‘It’s all right,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘My business is with Mrs Mapsted.’ She stood and watched the cavalcade file out through the gate, Miss Temme on Palomino in the lead, followed by Dick, who had just managed to edge past his elder sister. Sarah and Cissie brought up the rear. When they had gone, Dame Beatrice walked over to the house and found old Mrs Mapsted painting a rainwater barrel bright pink.

‘Cheerful, don’t you think?’ asked the old lady, regarding her handiwork with considerable pride. ‘I’ve bought a lot of this paint. I think I shall do the pigsties and the kitchen garden fence with it as well. I like a bit of colour about the place. What did you come about? Give me ten minutes to finish this, and we can go in and have a cup of tea. What’s Cissie Gauberon up to?’

‘She has just gone out riding with the May children and their governess.’

‘Don’t mean that. What’s she mean by sending Criollo and those other two brutes away again?’

‘I had no idea that they had been sent away.’

‘It’s happened before. They think I’ve no idea of what goes on in those stables, but I know more than I’ve ever told anybody. It’s always those same three horses that go away.’

‘I imagine that your son and Miss Gauberon used to hire them out to another stable.’

‘Then that stable is a long way from here,’ said old Mrs Mapsted cryptically. She finished painting the barrel, put away the paint, put the paint-brush into some turpentine and went indoors to put the kettle on. ‘If you ask me,’ she said, ‘it’s because of those three horses that Jack was killed.’

Dame Beatrice begged her to enlarge upon this statement, but the old lady, apart from making weird clucking noises as she nodded her head, refused to add anything to what she had said. They went into the house and while Mrs Mapsted made the tea, which took her some time and involved a good deal of ritual, Dame Beatrice studied the only bookcase in the room. One of the paper-covered volumes certainly gave colour to the Chief Constable’s theory that old Mrs Mapsted could have given the tetraethyl-thiuram-disulphide, with the worst intentions, to Jenkinson.

‘There’s another thing,’ she said, accepting a slice of very good home-made cake and a cup of tea. ‘Talking of horses, does Mrs Cofts still hire horses from here?’

‘I believe sometimes she goes over to Jed Nottingham’s place since Cissie Gauberon lost her temper with her over Viatka. She tried Paddy Donegal at

Linghurst Magna, but he didn't want her, so he told her his horses were all on regular hire.'

Dame Beatrice could not help wondering how old Mrs Mapsted came by all this information, as it was known that she had no cronies in the village and that she and Cissie Gauberon had as little to do with one another as possible. She thanked her hostess for the tea, and added, with apparent inconsequence:

'I suppose you were not a party to putting Jenkinson's body among the sops-in-wine?'

'Can't abide carnations,' said old Mrs Mapsted, eyeing her keenly. 'Otherwise, don't follow you.'

Dame Beatrice returned to the Stone House. By ten o'clock that night there was still no sign of Laura. Then a telephone message came through.



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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### The Penny Begins to Drop

*‘We were very fearful going over that Green as it was very dangerous. It was very hard work even for the Four Horses to get over that Green ...’*

Parson Woodforde

*‘Betsy Davy had a Letter from Mr Walker from Thetford and with it a Parcel in which was nothing but a Fox’s Brush or Tail.’*

Ibid



THE stables at the Blue Finn — the inn had no picture-signboard and Laura did not know whether the name derived from the appendage of a fish or from a compatriot of Paava Nurmi — were on the side away from the water, the blind side, as it were, of the building. They were almost as extensive as the inn itself (not larger, as had been suggested by the barman), and Laura had heard that in their time they had housed the horses of the Excise-men, as well as those of the smugglers, a gentleman’s agreement allowing of this to the convenience of both sides.

Laura assured herself that the horses were still there by going and peering over the bottom half of each door, for the old stabling had been modernized some three years previously and loose-boxes had replaced the old-fashioned stalls. Reassured upon the subject of the two mysterious horses, Laura mounted her machine and rode into New Seahampton in search of some tea. It was just before four o’clock when she passed the Seahampton Grammar School, and the boys were beginning to come out.

Laura was a creature of impulse, and, the notion coming to her that Mr Bond might have discovered something more about the death and laying-out of Jenkinson, she turned her machine in at the school gate and parked it under Mr Bond’s window.

Mr Bond saw her at once, for it was his habit to stand at his window when his boys were let out of school and make a mental note of any boy whose

behaviour was unseemly and of any master who seemed unduly anxious to get away from the building at a time when, in Mr Bond's opinion, masters should be conducting after-school societies, coaching games, finishing off their marking, keeping eye and ear on cloakrooms and corridors, taking detention, or in some other sort justifying their existence and not appearing to be in any indecent hurry to quit the scene of their labours and race home to their tea.

He had just noted, with approval, Mr Shorthouse, in Rugby football kit, leading a small group of boys on a cross-country run and, with strong disapproval, Messires Grimball and Sykes with golf-bags slung over their shoulders, when he spotted Laura. She smiled and went up to the window.

'May I come in?' she asked. Mr Bond smiled unhappily. Taking this as a welcome, she was soon at his door.

'I'm very busy,' he said. 'I like to see parents by appointment, Mrs—er—'  
'Gavin.'

'Gavin? Gavin? Ah, yes, a little freckled boy in 2A. It is too early to say yet *what* we expect from him, I'm afraid. Why not leave it until the end of his third year? We shall then be in a much better position to judge—'

Laura felt that she had better straighten matters out.

'I'm not a parent,' she said, 'and, when I am, the off-spring will be at Loretto. I'm Dame Beatrice's secretary, and I came—'

'Why, of course! Of course! You must forgive me, Mrs Gavin, but at this time of year, just before Easter, you know, I get a great many parents of the first and second-year boys all wishing to discuss future prospects. And really I just haven't the *time*.'

'No, no, of course not. I just wanted to know whether you'd found out any more about that business of the dead man Jenkinson.'

'No.' But Mr Bond sounded undecided and drew out the monosyllable to an inordinate length. He repeated it more lengthily still. 'Why?' he then suddenly demanded.

'Because I'm down here keeping an eye on some horses from the riding stables where he used to work.'

'I don't quite see—'

'No, neither do I. That's why I wondered whether you knew anything more.'

'I had better have the caretaker in.' He buzzed for his secretary. She, at any rate, knew better than to dash away from school the moment the bell rang, he reflected.

The caretaker took his time in answering the secretary's summons. Like most

of his kind, he stood on his dignity. Although assistant masters might scurry like flunkeys to keep an appointment with the headmaster, his was the more leisurely gait of the ambassador.

‘Sir?’ said he, materializing, bucket in hand, a good man interrupted in his duties.

‘Why the bucket?’ demanded Mr Bond, eyeing the vessel with a look of extreme distaste.

‘The second caretaker being took with the faulty boiler, as reported upon last Tuesday, and the third being took with the ’flu, it has fell to my lot, Mr Bond, to put down the wet sand and tea-leaves to sweep the front hall. That is all, sir,’ said Betters.

Worsted, as usual, by this ironclad adversary, Mr Bond abandoned the bucket-theme and introduced Laura.

‘This is Mrs Gavin, secretary to Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley. Tell her about the wood shavings.’

‘It being my custom, as the headmaster is aware, to take a Good Look Round before I lock up of a night, I become cognysant, the day after the Dame last come here, of wood-shavings in the woodwork room. “Ho!” I thinks. “What ’ave we ’ere?” It comes to me mind as I found simular wood-shavings the Opening Evening, that time in the school flat.’

‘Well, you’d hardly expect to find them in the gymnasium,’ said Laura.

‘Quite so, madam. But mark the sequel. Mixed with them wood-shavings there was wisps of ’ay. “Sir,” I says to Mr Turnbull, “you recollect of there being wood-shavings swept underneath one of your sinks on the Opening Evening?” “Well,” I says, “there’s been more, and again the woman cleaner swears she swept the woodwork shop right out before she went ’ome.” Mr Turnbull, it seems, ’as occasion to return to school some time just before five to get a tool he needed at ’ome, and in looking for the tool in the shed outside the workshop he finds a whole lot of shavings and had to shift the lot to get at what he wanted. He don’t want the shavings in the shed again, so he dumps them outside, but there’s a strong wind blowing on to the kitchen garden, and Mr Pitcher, what runs the kitchen garden, being a pal of his, and him not wishing to cause him no annoyance, he takes up the shavings in a bucket — same as it might be this ’ere bucket I’m holding, and carries ’em into the workshop and puts ’em under a bench, and makes himself very plain to me in the morning about allowing of the cleaners to dump a lot of muck in his tool-house. “Sir,” I says, “I will personally attend to the disposal of that there flotsam, and I will pursue enquiries,” I says,

“but it’s my opinion that no cleaner done no such thing. It must of been boys.” ’

‘Of course it wasn’t boys,’ put in Mr Bond. ‘Mr Turnbull is an excellent disciplinarian and would never permit boys to place inflammable material in a wooden shed which also contains paraffin, methylated spirits and creosote.’

‘It was the wisps of ’ay which decided me the first time,’ went on the caretaker, ignoring the interruption. ‘ “Ho!” I says, when I see ’em. “What ’ave we ’ere?” And with that I comes to Mr Bond ’ere, with the wisps of ’ay in me ’and, and invites of him to take a look at ’em.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Mr Bond. ‘Thank you, thank you. That is what I wanted Mrs Gavin to hear. She will make her own deductions, no doubt.’

‘ ’Ay, sir, is conducive to a line of thought about ’orses. And ’orses was the *raison d’être* of the late Jenkinson,’ said the caretaker, unwilling to be deprived of his climax. ‘Ah, ’ay equals Jenkinson, that man of straw.’ He nodded portentously and withdrew, his bucket clanking gently against his leg. Mr Bond sighed.

‘I don’t know whether he has hit the nail on the head or not,’ he said, ‘but, apart from this very slight and, to me, unacceptable evidence that the body may have been hidden under wood-shavings here after having been secreted in a stable somewhere else, we have found out nothing more. One of the fathers, thank goodness, is editor of the local paper, so that I have been able to keep the school from unwelcome publicity over the matter of Jenkinson’s corpse.’

‘Were the wood-shavings proved to have come from the woodwork shop before somebody put them into the shed?’ demanded Laura.

‘Dear me! That is very quick of you, Mrs Gavin.’ Mr Bond looked approvingly at her. ‘That seems to me a most intelligent question. Unfortunately, I never thought to ask it myself, but Mr Turnbull is still on the premises. Why not go along and have a word with him?’

Mr Turnbull was helping a boy to finish a rocking-horse for a young child’s birthday present.

‘That looks pretty ambitious,’ said Laura, when Mr Bond, having effected the introductions, had gone back to finish his own work.

‘That’ll do for tonight, Johnson,’ said Mr Turnbull to the boy. ‘That varnish has got to dry before you can touch the thing again. Yes,’ he went on, when the boy had said good night and had thanked him, ‘they can make what they like in their fourth year if they’re still carrying on with woodwork. Do you want to see some more of the work?’

‘I suppose it all makes a good deal of mess,’ said Laura when she had

expressed due admiration of the exhibits and was beginning to long for her tea. 'What do you do with the shavings and sawdust, and so forth?'

'What we *don't* do,' said Mr Turnbull, who was reddish-haired and quicktempered, 'is to shove it into the tool-house.'

'Look here,' said Laura earnestly, 'that last lot of shavings. Did they come from *your* wood or from somewhere else?' Mr Turnbull looked at her in surprise.

'What are you getting at?' he asked.

'That body that was found in the school hall after the Official Opening—'

'Yes? I didn't see it, but old Bond told us about it and asked us to keep it quiet.'

'It is thought that the body may have been hidden in your tool-house under some wood-shavings.'

'But why on earth should it be?' Turnbull turned suddenly belligerent.

'We don't know.'

'And, if it isn't a rude question, what's it got to do with you?'

'My husband is a policeman, so I'm interested. How often do you go to that tool-house?'

'Until I wanted this crowbar, not more than once this term. I use it a lot in the summer because the boys build huts. I keep special sets of cheaper tools for that job in case they leave them about on the field. You probably know what kids are.'

'So it would have been pretty safe to leave anything — even a dead body — there for a time?'

'I suppose so, but you couldn't *rely* on it to be safe.'

'No, I see that. What about the wood-shavings?'

'I'm afraid I don't know. I was mad at finding them there and chucked them out and began to clean the place up. Then I saw that they were beginning to blow over the school kitchen garden, so I collected them and bunged them in here for the cleaners to see to in the morning. The caretaker made a bonfire of them, I believe, and that's all I know.'

Laura thanked him, rode into the town and moodily ate scrambled eggs on toast and some very stale cake. Then she went back to the Blue Finn to see whether the horses were still there. To her astonishment the stables were brilliantly lighted. From one of the loose-boxes came the sound of cheerful whistling. A horse was being groomed, she supposed, but this was such an unusual procedure for that hour of the day that she was considerably astonished. As she stood there in the shadow of the building — by this time it was almost

dark — a man came out from the stables. As he passed before the back door of the inn, which was wide open and from which another bright light shone forth, she saw that it was the gipsy. He must have completed his business in Southampton very quickly, she thought. As soon as he had entered the inn she went up to the loose-box in which he had been working. What she saw there astonished her beyond measure. There was a handsome horse standing underneath a brilliant electric light. His head and neck were chestnut, but the rest of his body was that of a blue roan.

‘Good Lord!’ muttered Laura. ‘What’s all this?’ As at any moment the gipsy might reappear, she slipped back into the shadows, pushed her motor-scooter up to the churchyard wall and parked it beside the lych-gate. Then she went back to the inn.

She had never before attended an evening session at the Blue Finn and therefore had no way of knowing whether what she was listening to from outside the saloon bar was according to precedent or not. She was inclined to think that it was not. Instead of the usual roars of earnest conversation, the clink and rattle of glasses, the intermittent thumping of the penny-in-the-slot electric table games, the plonkings of darts into dartboards and the frequent squealing of brakes as fresh customers drew up in cars outside, there came from the Blue Finn the low murmur of conspiracy, the sudden hushing of a voice as though the speaker had paused to listen, the impatient tapping of a table as somebody was agitated into disagreement.

‘Must have let the room for a business meeting,’ thought Laura. She doubted whether the business was reputable. She wished she could get a glimpse of the people inside without their knowing that she was there. The window was open at the top and was uncurtained, but, although she was tall, she was not tall enough to see in, and the glass of the window was frosted.

‘Bust in, take a slant at the company, apologize for intrusion and sneak out,’ she said to herself. ‘Even if one of them is the gipsy, he’s got no reason on earth to suspect that I trailed him this afternoon.’

With Laura, to think was to act. She pushed open the door and walked up to the bar counter. The landlord was lolling behind it and welcomed her with a smile.

‘Good evening. Nice night for the time of year.’

Laura ordered some beer and sat on a high stool to drink it. The landlord retired to an inner room. Laura took out and lighted a cigarette and strove hard to catch the low conversation which was still going on behind her. She half-turned,

as though in search of an ash-tray, and got a glimpse of the company. Four men were seated at a table playing cards. She recognized every one of them. She smiled.

‘Well, well!’ she said. They were Jed Nottingham, the farmer Grinsted, the gipsy and Mr Turnbull from the Grammar School. Mr Turnbull and Jed Nottingham stood up.

‘Look who’s here!’ said Jed. ‘Don’t drink on your own. Come and join us.’

‘Let’s finish the game,’ growled Grinsted. The gipsy said nothing. His earth-brown hands were still, one resting on the table, the other holding the cards.

‘I’m winning,’ said Turnbull to Laura, with a grin.

‘Oh, don’t let me interrupt. I’ve got to get back almost at once,’ said Laura hastily. She was puzzled. The company seemed ill-assorted. Moreover, she did not believe that the conversation, as she had heard it from outside the door, had any bearing on a game of cards. And why were there no other customers in the bar? That was one of the most striking things about this unexpected encounter.

‘Not much company tonight,’ she remarked to the landlord.

‘Oh, they come in later, round about half-past eight,’ he answered easily. ‘We’re generally pretty quiet about this time. There’s more in the public, but there’s only a couple of chaps playing dominoes in the private, and old Mrs Clapham sitting over a pint of stout, as usual. No, we’re never busy at this time of night.’

Laura finished her beer and lit a cigarette, but it was soon evident that the four men were not going on with their conversation while she was there. She ordered another beer but there was nothing to be heard except the slapping down of the cards, the grunts as a game came to an end, and a muttered totting-up of the score.

She left the bar as soon as she could, strode away so that the sound of her footfalls were audible, and then sneaked back to listen at the window. She heard the gipsy say:

‘Yes, she was here earlier today. Is she all right?’

‘No, she isn’t,’ came in the surly tones of Grinsted. ‘She’s a blasted policeman’s—! You didn’t let her see the horses, did you?’

‘No, no,’ replied the gipsy soothingly.

‘Oh!’ thought Laura. ‘*Didn’t* you?’

‘Because,’ said Grinsted, ‘she’d be able to recognize them, and that wouldn’t do. *Sure* she didn’t see them?’

‘Of course. Now, listen—’

His voice became so low that, strain her ears as she would, Laura could not catch his next remarks. Suddenly there came a shout from Turnbull.

‘No, no! I’m damned if I do! I’m not going in any deeper! I’m getting out!’

There was the sound of chairs being overturned. Laura moved away from the window just as Turnbull appeared in the lighted doorway and tore off into the darkness. Voices were again raised from inside the inn. Laura heard, before she ran after Turnbull, who was obviously terrified:

‘He’ll blow the gaff, boys! We’ll have to take his number. I told you he was a bastard!’ This was said by Jed Nottingham. She did not catch Grinsted’s reply.

It was easy enough to follow Turnbull, for his shoes rang out on the metalled road like iron. There was frost in the air. Laura snuffed up the night scents as she ran. One of them, at least, was unmistakable. Horses had passed that way, and very recently. She saw, in time, by the light of one of the infrequent lamps which showed the way to the harbour, a heap of fresh droppings, and leapt over it. In front of her Turnbull slackened. There was the sound of voices in front — a party on their way to the pub. Laura ran lightly on and caught him up.

‘I’ve got a pillion seat on my bike,’ she said. ‘Back at the church. Come on.’ She took him by the sleeve, but Turnbull shook her off and suddenly darted down a side-path into the darkness. There were people everywhere now, for Old Seahampton possessed the Yachtsmen’s Club and a seaman’s hostel, in addition to the Blue Finn.

‘Might as well be Brighton front on an August Saturday, if only they’d light it better,’ thought Laura in disgust. ‘I can’t *shout* after the idiot with all these people about. He seems scared to death. I wonder whether it’s Grinsted he’s afraid of? Nasty customer, certainly.’

She turned aside to follow Turnbull and heard the sound of a small lasher before she had gone a hundred yards.

She remembered that the path led over a plank bridge and up to a small private house.

‘Mr Turnbull!’ she called at last. ‘Mr Turnbull, are you there?’

She received no answer. She waited and listened, but there was nothing to be heard except the sound of the lasher as it carried the brook to the sea.



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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### The Music Goes Round and Round

*‘Who hunts doth oft in danger ride;  
Who hawks, lures oft both far and wide.’*

William Basse



HERE was nothing more that Laura could do about Turnbull. She could scarcely gate-crash a private house in search of him. He must have found refuge with friends. Looking at the luminous dial of her watch, she decided that it was time to get back to the Stone House, where her employer, although not, thank goodness, thought Laura, the worrying sort, by this hour (far past dinner) might be wondering what had happened to keep so keen and interested an appetite from the table.

She went back to the churchyard wall, retrieved her motor-scooter and started it up. As she approached the Blue Finn again by a bumpy path across the churchyard green which led down to the sea-wall and round to the jetty, she observed the headlights of what appeared to be a large van. Laura rode towards the jetty, parked the motor-scooter near it, and went back on foot to investigate. The van was a horse-box. What was more, it had an occupant — only one, Laura thought. There was a whicker and the sound of a hoof pawing the stout wooden floor. The van had no driver, and the door of the stable yard was shut.

Laura returned to the jetty, confident that from there she would both see and hear if the van drove off. In it, she felt certain, there was one of the horses from the Elkstonehunt stables. Gone was all thought of returning immediately to the Stone House. Her business, as she saw it, was to find out where the van was going.

She stood there for twenty minutes or so, and began to feel cold, but at the end of this time the van put on its headlights and drove off.

‘Attababy!’ muttered Laura, and jerked the motor-scooter into action. The van lurched a little on the rough road, and, to her astonishment, did not take the obvious way to New Seahampton but turned down a narrow, stony track on to

the very road round the harbour which Laura had followed that same afternoon. She could not understand the manoeuvre. The tide, although by this time on the ebb, was still well over the path. True, this meant less than eight inches of water, but it seemed absurd to drive through this to reach the Southampton road when it could be gained so much more easily by cutting through the well-lighted, well-made roads of New Seahampton. She concluded that the essential thing was not ease and security but secrecy. Her blood raced. She forgot how hungry and cold she was. She let the van turn the corner, then crunched her machine down after it.

She dared not get up too close to the van; on the other hand, she dared not let it get too far away lest it should take some turning unfamiliar to her and she should lose sight of it altogether.

Her one comfort was that, with a horse inside it, the van would be unlikely to travel so fast that she could not match its pace. Through mud and brackish seawater it lurched and slithered, and Laura bucketed and skidded after it. By the time it turned off up the lane which the gipsy had taken, she was decidedly wet and chilled to the bone, but it did not occur to her to wonder whether the game was worth the candle.

Once they had turned on to the main Southampton road, the situation improved. The van speeded up a little. There was a certain amount of traffic and Laura contrived to sandwich a small, troubled car of rare vintage between herself and her quarry. The van was going just fast enough to keep the ancient car from getting past it, and Laura, satisfied that the driving mirror of the van could no longer pick her out with any certainty, chugged contentedly in the rear.

They entered Southampton by Belvedere Road, and at Rochester Street the vintage car turned off. Past the yacht-building station and Britannia Wharf went the van, down Marine Parade past the gasworks, past Phoenix Wharf, Gasworks Wharf, Burnley Wharf and Victoria Wharf. After Union Wharf and American Wharf it slowed and then decided to take to Elm Street and Elm Road. After that it turned into a cul-de-sac and drew up.

Laura was unprepared for the cul-de-sac. As she turned into it, the driver, Jed Nottingham, jumped down. In a second she had wrenched her little steed round and was back in Elm Road.

‘Well, they won’t go anywhere else tonight, I imagine,’ she thought, as she pulled up to see whether Jed would follow. She waited a full five minutes, but nobody came by except a docks policeman, who sauntered up and enquired:

‘In trouble, Miss?’

‘No, thanks,’ said Laura. ‘Just been trailing a horse-box.’

The policeman looked at her gravely.

‘I should get on home if I were you, Miss. Pity to spoil a lovely evening.’ He stared ruminatively at the motor-scooter. ‘You can’t come to much harm on that.’

‘I’m really not drunk!’ said Laura. The policeman shook his head.

‘There’s no need for me and you to quarrel, Miss,’ he said. ‘If I thought you were, I wouldn’t have any option. Now just you push off on the fairy-cycle and get a good night’s sleep. *I’ll* take care of the horse-box.’

‘Well, it’s just round the corner, in that cul-de-sac,’ said Laura. ‘Horse-thieves, I think. Or aren’t you interested?’

No longer certain of her *locus standi* as far as the law was concerned, she urged the motor-scooter into action. The last she saw of the policeman was his tall figure under an arc-lamp as he tramped stolidly onwards on his beat. She stopped at a public box and telephoned Dame Beatrice. This was the call that came through at ten o’clock. Having made it, she turned the motor-scooter round and returned to Elm Road, keeping a wary eye open for the policeman. There was no sign of him. A drunk went by, singing, but he was on the other side of the road.

Laura parked her vehicle once more and tiptoed to the end of the cul-de-sac. The horse-box was still there, the back of it was open and so were the double doors which led into what appeared to be a warehouse.

Laura had never been afraid to take risks and her curiosity was a spur. She crept along the narrow road to the open doors and peered in. There was Jed with his back to her. He was at the far end of the warehouse and was filling a bucket from a tap in the wall. Between him and Laura stood the horse, tethered on a long rein to a staple fixed to a side wall. She imagined that he might be the strange-looking chestnut-headed horse from the inn, but this was no longer a blue roan with a chestnut-coloured head and neck. He was a blue roan all over. The gipsy had finished his job.

‘Curiouser and curiouser,’ thought Laura, beating a strategic retreat. This time she did make for home, told her tale, ate an enormous supper in front of the dining-room fire, and next morning went over to the Elkstonehunt stables to find Cissie dosing the pony Shan.

‘Oh, he’s getting on all right,’ she said in response to Laura’s enquiry, ‘but I’m feeling pipped this morning. Jed Nottingham came over yesterday and told me he could sell some of my horses.’

‘Oh, I see. Then my message—’

‘Yes,’ said Cissie off-handedly. ‘Jolly good of you to bother, but it was quite O.K. Anyway, he’s brought back two this morning, so I’m not feeling very cheerful.’

‘Which two?’

‘If it interests you, Criollo and Appaloosa. He’s got rid of Tennessee but even that’s only on spec.’

Laura’s face cleared.

‘Oh!’ she said, on a note of great satisfaction; and went home to report to Dame Beatrice. ‘Though I can’t quite see what the game is,’ she concluded. ‘Anyway, I’ve had all my trouble for nothing. If Cissie let Jed Nottingham and the gipsy have those horses to sell, there’s nothing one can do about it. They’re her property. John Mapsted seems to have left the stables and all their contents to her.’

‘Don’t be discouraged,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I am not certain that I would have been prepared to go bail for all your actions of last night, but there is one particularly important fact which you have stumbled on quite by accident.’

‘You mean about the real colour of Tennessee?’

‘There is another, and a more important, discovery.’

‘Yes? You mean finding that man Turnbull mixed up with that mob? And he must be well and truly mixed up with them, you know, otherwise Jed Nottingham wouldn’t have remarked, on his departure, “I told you he was a bastard,” would he? Oh, yes. I say, it does begin to hang together, doesn’t it? There was the hay that was found among the wood-shavings. All the same, I can’t connect this Turnbull with any really dirty work. He isn’t the type.’

‘Then he may be in a position of some danger, as he himself probably realized when he fled from the Blue Finn. I shall go over to the school tomorrow afternoon and find out whether he reported for duty today. You left him, you say, to the best of your knowledge, in Old Seahampton?’

‘Yes. I’ll come with you and show you the little bridge over the lasher.’

‘I shall not need to know where it is. I shall not go there. Oh, and another thing. Are you afraid of Farmer Grinstead?’

Laura looked at her questioningly.

‘I have reason to believe that his stallion will be at home tomorrow. Go over and have a look at it. He is not likely to think that you were eavesdropping at the Blue Finn.’

‘Will that really help?’

‘It will help materially. If the stallion is there, a theory of mine will be

strengthened.'

'All right, then. I'll go. Does it help or hinder the theory if Grinsted isn't there either?'

Dame Beatrice gave her an approving and affectionate poke in the ribs.

'I perceive that we share the theory, dear child,' she observed.

'I jolly well perceive we *don't*!' said Laura, removing herself out of range. 'I haven't a clue to what you're talking about. Oh!'

'Ah!'

'Substitution!'

'Exactly.'

'But—I mean, it could only be smalltime stuff. You couldn't pull it off at Ascot or Goodwood.'

'Probably not at Aintree, Epsom or Hurst Park, either. But it has been known to occur at smaller meetings, to the great advantage of the persons concerned in the substitutions. When it comes to gambling, I suppose many a mickle makes a muckle.'

Laura gently corrected her accent, and after lunch on the following day they parted. Laura went to Cissie for a mount and rode over to Grinsted's farm on Mustang, who seemed pleased to see her again, and as she rode, she turned over in her mind the last visit she had made to the disagreeable farmer. This time the introductory subject of conversation, she decided, might be the evening encounter at the Blue Finn, and from that she would lead on to the matter of Grinsted's stallion.

Grinsted was in the kitchen quarrelling with the woman who, for courtesy's sake, was known to and by the village as Mrs Grinsted. It was she who first perceived Laura.

'Hold your noise, will you?' she said to her unshaven paramour. 'Here's company we have with us, then.'

'Good morning, Mrs Grinsted,' said Laura. 'It was really your husband I came to see.'

'Still after a look at Iceland Blue?' asked Grinsted, with a sour grin. 'You're welcome, Mrs Gavin, I'm sure. Come with me. A pretty creature he is, and very well I'm doing with him. Very well indeed.'

In spite of what Dame Beatrice had said, Laura had not expected such good fortune. She went across the yard with Grinsted, past his pig-sties and his covered well, past his blackcurrant and gooseberry bushes, through his open-ended cart-shed and down a narrow path to the stable. The top half of the door

was open. At the sound of voices the occupant of the stable came to the opening and put his head over. He cocked an enquiring eye at Laura and his ears twitched. Grinsted unfastened the lower part of the door. Laura's heart thumped with excitement. The horse was a blue roan.

'Come you out, then, my dear old man,' said Grinsted, 'and show yourself to the lady.'

The horse snorted and ambled forward. Laura stood still. He nuzzled her shoulder.

'Hallo, Iceland Blue,' she said, putting out a hand to caress him. The creature blew gently into her hair.

'Well,' said Grinsted, 'and what do you think of him, Mrs Gavin?'

Laura was so puzzled and so excited that she almost failed to reply, but she realised in time that an answer was expected and that Grinsted was staring at her.

'He's a *love!*' she said.

'There, now, didn't I tell you?' demanded Grinsted, highly delighted. 'Didn't I tell you, Mrs Gavin?' He patted the horse. 'Much money have I made from him in my time. Of course, he's going back a little now, as you can see, but a good old man he is, and a better young one he was, and always as you see him now, kind and gentle and like a lamb he is.'

On their way back to the farmyard gate Laura said:

'What was that red-haired young man doing in company with Jed Nottingham? He didn't look like one of Jed's friends.'

'Ah, him,' said Grinsted, spitting into the middle of a rose-bush. 'Come to think of it, Mrs Gavin, I can't say I rightly remember. Jed didn't bring him, so far as I know. I think he just joined us in a friendly way, as you or I might do were we on our own in a pub and encountered pleasant strangers.'

'So, whatever kicked John Mapsted to death, it wasn't Iceland Blue,' said Laura to Dame Beatrice, when they met. 'How did *you* get on?'

Dame Beatrice had visited the school and then had repaired to the Blue Finn at six for refreshment and conversation.

'An interesting and informative man, the landlord there,' she observed. 'We had a very pleasant chat.'

'Did you talk about horses?'

'No. We talked about the Budget, motor-car racing, equal pay for teachers of both sexes, his son in Australia, the purchasing power of the pound in 1929 and the rules of Canasta.'

'Good heavens!'

‘Equal pay led us by obvious stages to the subject of mixed schools. From there we switched to grammar schools. Then we segregated the sexes and spoke of the Seahampton Grammar School for Boys.’

‘Aha! And so to friend Turnbull?’

‘And so, as you say, to friend Turnbull. I allowed the landlord to mention his name first by referring to the fact that no opprobrium now attaches to a schoolmaster who is seen to enter a public house. Most of the masters, I was then informed, frequent a modern hostelry in New Seahampton. Mr Turnbull, however, is a keen yachtsman who has built his own boat—’

‘Woodwork and metalwork master,’ interposed Laura.

‘Yes, and, like most of the yachting fraternity, when he wants a drink he usually goes to the Yacht Club for it. Lately, however, he has been seen at the Blue Finn in company with Grinsted and Mr Nottingham.’

‘Was the gipsy mentioned?’

‘No, and I thought that that fact might be significant. I myself could not possibly introduce the subject of the gipsy, of course. I have never been to the Blue Finn in your company, or, indeed, at any time until this evening, and I could not risk arousing the landlord’s suspicions.’

‘Well, you’ve got the main point, I imagine. I wonder when the four of them teamed up? I wish we knew whether there was any connection between John’s death and this business of altering Tennessee’s colour and calling him Iceland Blue. No, I mean that the opposite way round. He must have begun life as a blue roan and the gipsy changes him to chestnut when it’s necessary. By the way, was Turnbull at the school?’

‘No, and as the headmaster had received no message which would account for his absence, it seemed to me reasonable to send a constable to his lodgings to make some enquiries.’

‘Any result?’

‘I remained at the school until a message came through from the police-station. It appears, from the landlady’s evidence, that Mr Turnbull arrived home after midnight, but left the house at his usual time this morning and that she concluded he had gone to school.’

‘Looks pretty fishy, wouldn’t you say? That means he went to ground in that place by the lasher, but something has cropped up since.’

‘I confess I do not like it. Mr Turnbull may have been very foolish, but the teaching profession is not, at present, overcrowded.’

With this elliptical remark, she closed the subject, and talked about cantelupe

melons until bedtime.



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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### The Mystery of Mr Turnbull

*‘I conceive they may assume, steal or contrive a body.’*

Sir Thomas Browne



MR BOND called Mr Gadd into conference.  
‘What do you know about Turnbull?’ he demanded.

‘Hasn’t he sent word?’ asked Mr Gadd.

‘No, he has not. What is more, Dame Beatrice, who is inclined to haunt the school since that wretched fellow laid himself down among our flowers, was here again, and seems to look upon Turnbull’s absence as suspicious. He left his lodgings at the usual hour this morning. I have telephoned the police and am expecting them at any time, but I thought that there might be some information we could give them. Do you know anything of his private affairs?’

‘Not much, sir. He’s not in the staff-room a great deal, and he usually goes home to lunch. I doubt whether any of us would know much about him. His is rather a job apart.’

‘Quite, quite. I appreciate that, of course. But has he no crony on the staff?’

‘I believe Spencer has been out with him once or twice in that boat he built last year.’

‘Spencer?’ The headmaster frowned. He had no favourites on the staff and was far too correct, professionally, to have any open dislikes, but sometimes he found himself wondering whether the school would not be the better without Mr Spencer, whom he suspected of exercising a subversive influence on some of the younger men. However, Spencer had given in his notice.

‘I don’t think they are close friends,’ said Mr Gadd, recalling Mr Bond’s thoughts to the matter in hand, ‘but I know something was said last summer about sailing the boat round to Lymington.’

Mr Bond buzzed for Miss Cowley and sent her for Mr Spencer. That gentleman was expressing a pithy opinion upon the character and attainments of one Matthews in Form 3A and was annoyed at being interrupted before he had

had time to do himself justice. He flung the chalk at Matthews, tossed the duster to a boy in the front row, said 'Clean the board and write up the homework,' and hitched his gown with a movement of irritation before he banged himself out of the room. A cheerful bellowing and the crash of overturned chairs followed his exit. He presented himself with a bad grace before the headmaster.

'You sent for me, Headmaster?'

'Yes, yes, yes.' His suspicions of Mr Spencer always made Mr Bond nervous in his presence. 'It's about Turnbull. He hasn't turned up this morning and has sent no reason for absence. I wondered whether you had any idea...?'

'No, Headmaster.' By the tone of this reply Mr Spencer contrived to suggest that Mr Bond was wasting time for which the public was paying.

'I had better be frank with you. The fact is that Turnbull seems to have vanished on his way to school. The police have been informed, of course, but I should be glad of a private notification before they arrive. You follow?'

'Well...' said Mr Spencer.

'Sit down,' said the headmaster.

'I'd better go,' said Mr Gadd.

'No, no, Gadd, unless Spencer wishes it.'

'No, that's all right. It's nothing much. He's been worried lately about a missing mallet.'

'It's not been reported to me!'

'No, Headmaster?'

'Does he think one of the boys had it?'

'No.'

'Come along, man. Out with it!'

'It turned up again—with blood on it.'

'What!'

'Simkin could tell you more about that, I believe.'

'I think, sir,' ventured Mr Gadd, 'this is something that ought to be said to the police.'

'In my school,' said Mr Bond magnificently, 'the headmaster is the ultimate and not the penultimate authority.' He buzzed for Miss Cowley and sent her for Mr Simkin. The science master was in the middle of a tricky experiment involving phosphorus and sent the secretary back with a firm refusal to abandon it. As even Mr Bond had no authority, penultimate or otherwise, to leave a laboratory full of lively boys with a dangerous substance in their midst, he had perforce to accept Mr Simkin's ruling, to the unconcealed pleasure of Spencer

and the concealed satisfaction of Gadd, who was still vulnerable enough to have resented the headmaster's last remark to him.

The Superintendent chose this moment to come to the school.

'No, sir, we have no news of the missing gentleman,' he said in answer to Mr Bond's first question. 'There is the landlady's evidence that he left at the usual time this morning; that he was dressed as usual for school; that he'd been a bit terse at breakfast because his overalls had not come back from the laundry — which certainly sounds as if he fully *intended* to come here as usual — and that's all we know. We shall pursue our enquiries, of course, but when a gentleman does not use the public transport and does not garage a car, but just simply walks to his work, it's like looking for a needle in a haystack, because one doesn't know where to start the questioning. But if I might get a few facts, sir, from you or your gentlemen, it might be something to go on. Was he in any sort of trouble, do you know?'

'You are being disingenuous, Superintendent,' said Mr Bond. 'Dame Beatrice Bradley reported to you, and, from what she told *me*, I deduce that you do at least know of two of Mr Turnbull's associates.'

'Well, yes, you're right there, sir, and I've interviewed both the gentlemen. There's nothing they can tell me. According to them, it was just a boozier acquaintanceship. They claim to know nothing of Mr Turnbull's private life and there is no reason why we should connect them with his disappearance.'

'They were at school with him,' said Mr Bond tartly. 'Well, it's your business, I suppose. I have just heard a remarkable story which I was about to probe when you arrived. Mr Gadd, kindly go to the laboratory and ask Mr Simkin to come along at the very earliest moment that it is safe to do so. Mr Simkin,' he added for the benefit of the Superintendent, 'is supervising an experiment with phosphorus, and it would not be to the general interest to demand his presence at the moment.'

As it happened, Mr Simkin, who was a mild-mannered person when he was not actually demonstrating, came back with Gadd and apologized humbly for keeping the headmaster waiting.

'Take a seat, Mr Simkin,' said Mr Bond handsomely, 'and give ear to the Superintendent. Really *attend* to him, I mean.' For if Mr Simkin had a fault, it was, as Mr Bond knew, to go into a daydream at staff meetings and other important functions — a habit which had caused him often to lose the thread even of the headmaster's own carefully-thought-out perorations.

'Very well, Mr Bond,' said Mr Simkin meekly.

‘Perhaps, sir,’ ventured the Superintendent, ‘you yourself would first be good enough to inform me of the story you referred to when I came in.’

‘Yes. That is why we have Mr Simkin with us. Now, Simkin, what is all this about a mallet?’

‘Oh, that! Yes, the boy must have taken a very nasty knock, I should say.’

‘What boy?’

‘The boy the other boy hit on the head with the mallet.’

‘I have no doubt,’ said Mr Bond, ‘that your remarks bear a perfectly clear interpretation to yourself, but I think, for our benefit, you had better translate them. Do, my dear fellow, begin at the beginning.’

‘Certainly, Headmaster. Perhaps I should tabulate. First, there was the question of the mallet. Turnbull brought it to me and said it looked like blood. Would I test for blood? I tested, and, of course, it *was* blood. Human blood. We pulled Miss Cowley into play—’

‘You what?’

‘We asked Miss Cowley, as she is responsible for the First Aid...’

‘Oh, yes, I see.’

‘And she offered the opinion—’

‘Proffered.’

‘Thank you, Headmaster. She proffered the opinion that some boy or boys must have struck some other boy or boys upon the head with the mallet.’

‘Why upon the head?’ asked the Superintendent.

‘Hairs, and so forth,’ Mr Simkin explained. ‘We then tested for fingerprints.’

‘Fingerprints, sir?’ exclaimed the Superintendent.

‘Well, it’s rather easy, isn’t it?’ said Mr Simkin. ‘I mean, you blow a bit of powder about and take people’s prints, and so forth, and the answer is...’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Well, no prints but Turnbull’s upon the mallet, if you see what I mean.’

‘From this you deduce, sir...?’

‘That some boy, or boys, knew enough to wear gloves,’ said Mr Simkin. ‘After all, one can’t quite see Turnbull hitting boys with mallets.’ The headmaster stared at him in dire disapproval.

‘I don’t understand you,’ he said. The Superintendent intervened.

‘If you please, sir,’ he said. ‘This is very interesting to me.’

But Mr Simkin could not go on.

‘That’s all,’ he said.

‘It has a bearing upon Mr Turnbull’s disappearance, perhaps?’ the

Superintendent suggested.

‘Has Turnbull disappeared? How very extraordinary,’ said Mr Simkin. The Superintendent would have liked an elucidation of this remark, but Mr Simkin had vanished into a limbo of his own, and with a sigh the Superintendent got up.

‘It seems needless to trouble you further, sir,’ he said. ‘Later on I had better see Mr Simkin alone.’

At this, all the headmaster arose in Mr Bond.

‘Simkin, this is monstrous!’ he proclaimed. ‘My dear fellow, please remember that you are a citizen of no mean city. Tell the Superintendent at once of the conclusions you must have come to.’

‘But I have come to no conclusions!’ cried Simkin. ‘The facts are as I have stated. There were hairs on the mallet and there was a good deal of human blood on it, but beyond these things there was nothing.’

‘But why did you not report to me? Surely you regarded the matter as serious?’

Mr Simkin looked obstinate.

‘I regarded the whole thing as an exercise in practical science,’ he said stiffly. ‘Apart from the scientific aspect, I thought nothing of it at all.’

Accustomed as he was to the mental gymnastics of his staff and to the aberrations of Mr Simkin in particular, even the headmaster looked astonished.

‘How did you know they were Mr Turnbull’s prints on the handle of the mallet?’ the Superintendent enquired.

‘Oh, I checked against prints he had left on his other tools, of course,’ replied Simkin, himself looking mildly surprised.

‘May I ask whether Mr Turnbull himself knew of these activities?’ asked Mr Bond angrily.

‘I did not mention the matter of the fingerprints to him, Headmaster.’

‘How did you come to get hold of the mallet in the first place?’

‘He brought it to me. He said he had found it in his tool-house. It had been missing for about a week.’

‘Just a moment, sir,’ put in the Superintendent. ‘This matter may be very important indeed. I think I must ask Mr Simkin to come to my headquarters and make a statement which I shall ask him to sign.’

‘Oh, yes, a pleasure,’ said Mr Simkin.

‘But, really, Simkin,’ said Mr Bond, ‘this is all completely extraordinary! Do you really mean to tell me that you found this blood-encrusted object, which had obviously been purloined and then put back, and did not think of reporting to

me?’

‘We found no boys with broken heads,’ said Mr Simkin sullenly, ‘so I saw no need to make a matter of it.’

‘Well, really!’ said Mr Bond helplessly. ‘And you, Spencer? How do you come into this?’

‘Quite simply, Headmaster. Turnbull brought me the mallet and said — I think I recollect his actual words — that he had “found the blessed thing and look what a mess somebody had made of it.” I remarked that it looked like blood and (for a joke, really), advised him to take it to Simkin for analysis.’

‘A joke?’ Mr Bond looked astounded. ‘I understand, without sympathizing with it on this particular occasion, Simkin’s severely scientific attitude, but — *a joke!* Really, Spencer! The Superintendent must think schoolmasters have a curious sense of humour!’

‘But I never thought of it as *blood*,’ protested Mr Spencer. ‘If I had, I should have reported to you at once!’

‘I hope so, I’m sure!’ snapped Mr Bond. He buzzed for Miss Cowley, who came in looking scared.

‘Miss Cowley, what about that bloodstained mallet?’ demanded Mr Bond. ‘I thought that you, at least, had your wits about you and possessed a sense of responsibility!’

‘Mallet? What mal—? Oh, yes!’ said Miss Cowley. ‘The one Mr Turnbull lost and then it turned up again, all red paint and horsehair.’

‘All *what?*’

‘Wasn’t it?’ asked Miss Cowley, looking from the headmaster to the Superintendent. ‘Oo-er!’

‘Quite!’ said Mr Bond. ‘Who told you it was red paint and — er — horsehair?’

‘Mr Turnbull did.’

‘But I distinctly told Turnbull it was human blood!’ protested Mr Simkin. Miss Cowley gave a slight scream and followed this with a hysterical giggle.

‘Mr Simkin *is* a one!’ she said. ‘He’s always pulling people’s legs.’

The headmaster, who felt he had had about enough, dismissed her, and turned to the Superintendent.

‘My sphere of usefulness in the matter appears to be at an end,’ he said. ‘When would you wish Mr Simkin to report at the police-station?’

‘Oh, when his duties for the day are over. That will suit us very nicely, sir, thank you.’

So Mr Spencer and Mr Simkin were returned to their classes and the Superintendent, rising to go, looked hard at the man before him, and said:

‘Sir, I rely on your discretion entirely.’

‘Surely, surely,’ said Mr Bond, a little testily.

‘I should wish you to know, sir, why we regard this story of the mallet, coupled with Mr Turnbull’s disappearance, as being of the first importance.’

‘Indeed, Superintendent?’

‘Indeed, sir. You read in the papers a while back, of a certain Mr John Mapsted being kicked on the head by his horse, perhaps? He was found dead in the stables by his groom, the man whose body was afterwards discovered at the school here.’

‘Yes? A most extraordinary business, Superintendent. Has there ever arisen an explanation of it?’

‘No, sir. Not to say an explanation, but some pieces of that particular puzzle are beginning to fit together.’

‘And about the mallet? You don’t mean...?’

There’s a distinct possibility, sir. Neither ourselves nor the other interested parties — I refer to the relatives and friends, and to Dame Beatrice Bradley, who, as you may know, saw the body — were ever really satisfied with the explanation of Mr Mapsted’s death. We ourselves, the police, are so dissatisfied that if, upon further investigation, this mallet business doesn’t get itself cleared up, we may ask for an exhumation.’

‘Good heavens, Superintendent!’

‘I must have that mallet, sir, and at once. I dare say, as Mr Simkin examined it, he could point it out to me in Mr Turnbull’s workshop.’

‘Yes, yes, of course. I will take you to the workshop at once, and Miss Cowley can get Simkin to join us there.’

Mr Simkin recognized the mallet readily. As the superintendent had summed him up as completely disinterested and reliable where questions of fact were concerned, he accepted his word for the mallet and took it away with him. On his way out he stopped at the little window of the secretary’s office and tapped on the glass. Miss Cowley, whose nerves appeared to have suffered a shock, looked up from her typewriter and screamed. Then she giggled, and opened the window.

‘Miss Cowley,’ said the Superintendent, ‘can you account at all for Mr Turnbull’s absence from school today? I know the school secretary often knows things about the school staff which don’t, for various reasons, always come to

the ears of the headmaster.'

'Oh, you're quite right about that,' said Miss Cowley. 'But I don't think I can help. I don't know a lot about Mr Turnbull. He isn't like the regular classroom staff, you see.'

'I appreciate that, Miss Cowley. So you can't tell me anything useful about him?'

'Sorry, but I don't think so.'

'All right. Thank you, my dear.' He was turning away when suddenly he turned back again. 'About this mallet,' he said. 'I suppose you can't possibly remember which day you saw it?'

'Oh, is *that* it? Goodness me! And was it really covered in blood? I never saw it, you know. I was only told about it, and Mr Spencer, joking, like, asked me to look out for any boys with sore heads, but that was all.'

'Oh, you weren't actually shown the mallet?'

'No. But I remember the day, because Jones put a bradawl into Carter's leg, and I thought it ought to be a hospital job, so I rang up. I always keep a note of hospital cases because we always send the hospital our harvest thanksgiving and Mr Bond likes to remind the boys beforehand of what the hospital's done for them during the year. We tried eggs one Easter, but it wasn't as successful as marrows and things. Eggs do seem to get broken with boys, don't they?'

The Superintendent did not attempt to express an opinion. He said:

'If you have the date, I should be glad.'

Miss Cowley turned up her records and soon found it. In spite of a tendency to giggle and squeal at times, she was fundamentally a sensible, reliable girl.

'Here you are,' she said. The Superintendent made a note of the date and realized, as he was doing so, that it was two days after John Mapsted's death that the mallet had been returned. He could not feel that this was a coincidence. He thanked Miss Cowley and returned to the police station. He proposed to obtain Mr Simkin's signed statement before making any further move. No report, he was told, had come in to explain the disappearance of Turnbull.

Mr Simkin turned up at five minutes to five and made his statement. It was read to him and he signed it.

'And now, sir,' said the Superintendent kindly, 'on the understanding that nothing of what is said here today goes back to Mr Bond, I shall be obliged if you'll answer a few questions.'

'I am really not afraid of the headmaster,' protested Mr Simkin.

'Of course not, sir. I was not suggesting such a thing,' said the



Superintendent mendaciously. 'But we usually find that ladies and gentlemen speak more freely when they know there will be no repercussions. Excuse me just one moment, sir.' He reached for the telephone. 'I think the doctor gets back from his afternoon visits about now.' He leaned back in his chair, crossed his long, thick legs and talked casually but clearly. 'Doctor Rollins? Superintendent Humblederry here. Look, Doctor, that Elkstonehunt case. Mapsted. Yes. You remember it? Good. Well, we've some evidence here that a crime may have been committed by striking someone on the head with a mallet. Ha, ha! A great big wooden mallet, yes! Seriously, Doctor, could such a thing have caused Mapsted's death, and not a kick from a horse, as was suggested? It could? No, I know. *We* weren't happy about the horse theory, either. Right. Thank you very much. Good-bye.'

'Murder?' asked Mr Simkin.

'Quite likely, sir.' The Superintendent connected himself with another number. 'Dame Beatrice? Good afternoon. Could you get her for me, please? Police-station at Seahampton speaking. Yes, personally. A medical opinion wanted. Ah, good of you, Dame Beatrice. You remember the John Mapsted business? No, I know you weren't satisfied. Neither were we. Well, now, how do you react to the theory that he was knocked on the head with a mallet? Yes, it turned up at the Grammar School. Most odd, I know. Thank you, Dame Beatrice. By the way, it seems that one of the masters at the school failed to report for duty today. Chap named Turnbull. Oh? Oh, really? Right. I'll come over at once — well, not quite at once, because I've got another of the masters here who may be able to tell me something useful. The science master who happened, by all that's lucky, to test the stains on the mallet. Yes, a first-class man, I should say.'

Mr Simkin looked pleased.

'Oh, I — er —' he said, as the Superintendent put down the receiver.

'Now, sir,' said the Superintendent, brushing aside this modest disclaimer, 'to the point at issue. This mallet. No doubt you have gathered from my telephone conversations that it may have been used to batter a man to death.'

'Yes, yes, but from the purely scientific point of view...'

The Superintendent began to sympathize with Mr Bond.

'Quite, sir,' he said patiently, 'and I do appreciate that your knowledge may be the means of bringing a murderer to justice, but for the moment all I want to know is this: when you found no fingerprints except those of Mr Turnbull on the handle of the mallet, what conclusion did you come to?'

'That he had handled the mallet. But, of course, he would have done, you

see, because it was in his hand when he showed it to me.'

'Now, just a moment, sir. I understood that it was Mr Spencer who showed it to you.'

'Not at all. Spencer suggested I should examine it, but I did not see him handle it.'

'That's perfectly clear, then, sir. Wouldn't you have expected Mr Spencer to take it from Mr Turnbull to show it you?'

'I never expect anything of Spencer. A mean-spirited, disgruntled, sometimes foolishly facetious man,' said Mr Simkin mildly. 'Not that one likes to speak unprofessionally, of course.'

'So, as far as you know, nobody handled the mallet except Mr Turnbull until you took it into your own hands to test it for human blood. What made you think of human blood, sir?'

'But I didn't. It looked like blood. I merely thought that one of the boys might have struck an animal with it. Some boys do cruel things. It just *turned out* to be human blood. That is to say, it answered all the tests.'

'I am greatly obliged to you, sir. Were you present when the body of the man Jenkinson was discovered at your school?'

'No, I think I'd gone home. I heard about it the next day, though. Most extraordinary.'

'Yes, sir. Now, the hairs on the mallet. Can you be certain they were human hairs?'

'Oh, yes, quite certain. I had them under the microscope.'

'You could not form any opinion as to the colour, of course?'

'I should not care to be positive. I washed them, of course, before I put them under the microscope, but they were few in number and had been soaked in blood. At a venture, they might have been dark brown. Yes, I think I may say you could term them a darkish brown, exactly like Spencer's hair.'

'And there is nothing you can add, sir, to your information?'

'I cannot think of anything more. If anything else about the mallet should occur to me I will let you know.'

'And you are positive you identify this, sir, as the mallet you examined and tested?'

'Quite, quite positive,' said Mr Simkin. 'But send it to your forensic laboratory if you are not convinced. There's plenty of blood on it for them. Their tests would naturally be more stringent than my own.'

The Superintendent, who fully intended getting his experts to test the mallet

for bloodstains, smiled gravely. An hour later he had had his tea and was pulling up in front of the Stone House, Wandles Parva, where Dame Beatrice and Laura were awaiting him. The Chief Constable was with them, but was present unofficially, paying a friendly call only, he explained to the Superintendent.

‘But I’m very glad to see you, sir,’ declared the Superintendent. ‘This business is likely to be as much a matter for the County Police as for us in Seahampton, for it seems certain now that it began here in this village with the murder of John Mapsted.’

‘Are you certain it was murder, then? I know we’ve entertained suspicions.’

‘Doesn’t seem any doubt of it now, sir. I think I’ve found the weapon. Another thing: the woodwork master at the Grammar School is missing under what I’m quite certain are suspicious circumstances. It seems reasonable to think that a mallet from the school workshop killed John Mapsted, and not a kick from a horse as we were led to believe.’

‘A mallet, eh? You don’t suspect this woodwork man of killing Mapsted, I suppose?’

‘No, sir, I do not.’ He gave an account of what had passed that afternoon at Seahampton. ‘So I’ve put Detective-Inspector Jackson and Detective-Sergeant Toms on to the job of finding Turnbull,’ he concluded, ‘and I only hope he’ll be alive when they do find him.’

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Old Ladies at Coffee

*‘... but I find my horses yet unable to perform the journey. I expect you’ll assist us with a pair of fresh horses, as you promised.’*

Oliver Goldsmith



**I**N addition to looking for Turnbull, the police interviewed Jed Nottingham, Farmer Grinsted and, on Laura’s recommendation (so to speak) the gipsy, whose whereabouts were betrayed by Nottingham after an abrupt intimation from the police that it would be healthier for him to help rather than hinder.

Zozo was uncommunicative. He did not remember drinking with Turnbull, knew nothing of any quarrels, knew nothing of any horse except his own that pulled his caravan, and had no recollection of ever having seen Laura before, either at Old Seahampton or anywhere else.

‘Talk about the Wise Monkeys!’ said Laura disgustedly to Dame Beatrice afterwards. ‘Do you think he *does* know anything about Mr Turnbull?’

‘No, I don’t. He knows all about substituting horses, though, and he does not intend his tongue to get him into trouble. What I do not understand is that he and Mr Nottingham and Grinsted — for I take it they are all in it together — dared to change the horse’s appearance so openly.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Laura. ‘It was because the stables at the Blue Finn are fifteen miles from here, I expect. And Old Seahampton isn’t anywhere near a racecourse, either. It was only my happening to recognize the horses which made it interesting. I suppose Cissie was in the know, and I take it that John Mapsted had been a party to the goings-on.’

‘The police are going to question Miss Gauberon. In fact, I imagine that they have already done so.’

‘Old Mrs Mapsted, too, I expect,’ said Laura. ‘I bet they get about as much change out of her as they did out of that gipsy chap.’

‘I think I must have another chat with her myself,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘With Miss Gauberon also, very probably.’

‘Do you want my company?’

‘Not this time, thank you. I wish, though, that you would contrive to have a long conversation with Mrs Cofts’ sister-in-law, preferably about horses.’

‘She doesn’t ride.’

‘Therefore she probably has strong opinions on the subject.’

‘Envious of Mrs Cofts? Likely to give me the low-down about Viatka getting that over-reach she was so cagey about — that sort of thing?’

‘Excellent. And I should like your visit there to coincide with mine to Mrs Mapsted.’

‘Suppose you run into Mrs Cofts there?’

‘She is unlikely to call on Mrs Mapsted. She might go to Miss Gauberon, but, if so, it will be to hire a horse and the visit therefore will be a short one.’

‘Right. I’ll push off and see what I can do about Miss Cofts. She hates Mrs C. enough to remember anything to her discredit, I’ve no doubt!’

Dame Beatrice followed her out of the house some ten minutes later. Old Mrs Mapsted was planting potatoes. She had a dibber made from the haft of a spade and with it she jabbed angrily at the soil.

‘Earlies!’ she said scornfully, as Dame Beatrice came up. ‘What do they want with Earlies? The only other idea they have is Main Crop. Now *I* say that the *late* potatoes are the crop that bring in the money.’

‘Wireworm,’ retorted Dame Beatrice.

‘Wireworm?’ Old Mrs Mapsted flourished her sharpened tool. ‘What do *you* know about wireworm?’

‘Little rings,’ replied Dame Beatrice, waving a yellow claw. ‘Nibble, nibble, nibble, Mr Gibbon.’

‘You don’t find wireworm on *my* land. I believe in lime.’

‘Like a god, both preserver and destroyer. A word with you.’

‘No time to spare. Here, you plant while I dib.’

The two elderly ladies completed three rows of early potatoes. Then Mrs Mapsted straightened her back.

‘A nice cup of coffee,’ she said, ‘with a modicum of sugar-cane ferment.’

‘Molasses,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Rum!’

‘That is exactly what I said.’

‘Ignorance is not always bliss, as the mule said when it kicked the robot

instead of the professor.'

'I shall be very glad of a cup of coffee with a teaspoonful of rum in it. Thank you.'

'Unappreciative of lavish hospitality. *Teaspoonful* of rum, indeed!'

Restored to good humour, as Dame Beatrice had known she would be by these exchanges, old Mrs Mapsted led the way into the house and heated the coffee.

'Always prepare it beforehand,' she said. 'Tastes better. Some people say it must be fresh-made. Lot of nonsense. It redeems itself, left to stand.'

Unable, since she seldom made coffee, and, in any case, unwilling, to challenge this last statement, Dame Beatrice accepted her cup and a glass of rum, and said:

'What about Gipsy Zozo?'

'Guesthood under false pretences! You've come to pump me!'

'Why else did I help you to plant potatoes? Of course I've come to pump you. The time is ripe for confidences.'

'Right.' Old Mrs Mapsted took a gulp of scalding coffee. 'Jack was murdered.'

'So much appears to be established. The police think they know the weapon that was used.'

'Wasn't Percheron's hoof. Tested him myself. Don't care much about horses. Went into his stable and shouted at him. Stamped his feet and nearly blew the hair off my head, but not a kick out of him. I decided I wanted to know, you know. Know now.'

'So what about Gipsy Zozo?'

'Wouldn't stick to the point if you drank as much as I do. Still, for what it's worth, he's a clever rascal. Cissie Gauberon didn't know, of course. Thought only of gymkhanas, silly girl — or do I mean point-to-point?'

Dame Beatrice could not believe that Cissie Gauberon, whether she thought of gymkhanas or point-to-point, did not know all that went on at the Elkstonehunt riding stables.

'How well did your son get on with that Mr Nottingham who has the stables at Linghurst Parva?' she enquired.

'Dog shouldn't eat dog,' said Mrs Mapsted, 'and to make sure, it's sometimes best to keep 'em apart.'

'And the farmer, Mr Grinsted?'

'A villian, if ever there was one!'

‘What sort of villain?’

‘A thieving, lying, double-twisting monster!’

‘Thieving?’

‘He stole my Large White boar and changed his colour and sold him back to me. Vegetable dye. Turned him into a Berkshire. I threatened Grinsted with the law. Got my money back.’

‘Lying?’

‘Swore the animal *was* a Berkshire. I knew better.’

‘Double-twisting?’

‘Practised on the pig to make sure of the horses. Wicked sinner!’

‘Ah!’

‘Don’t “ah” me! I know what I’m talking about. None better. What did you say they killed Jack with?’

‘I am not at liberty to tell you. In any case, there is no proof yet.’

‘Please yourself. Could have been done with a mallet. Wasn’t Percheron, anyway.’

If Dame Beatrice was a little startled by the reference to a mallet, she did not betray the fact.

‘Not Percheron, no,’ she agreed. ‘Tell me more about Zozo. How did your son come to meet him?’

‘I don’t know that Jack ever met him. He was the man Grinsted paid to fake my Pig.’

‘Yes, I suppose so. And then he faked your son’s horses, and I think Miss Gauberon *did* know.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Mrs Gavin saw two of the horses, Criollo and Appaloosa, at Old Seahampton, and reported the fact. Miss Gauberon was not surprised.’

‘Criollo and Appaloosa? Rubbishy brutes. Couldn’t win a race against a pony pulling a coal-cart.’

‘They were substituted, we think, for better horses, to deceive the backers. This would lengthen the odds when the better horses ran at other meetings.’

Old Mrs Mapsted chuckled. She was obviously untroubled by scruples.

‘Couldn’t risk it very often, I suppose,’ she said. ‘One would need to use common sense. Doubt whether Jack ever did.’

With this remark she gathered up the coffee cups and carried them into the scullery. It appeared that the conversation had terminated. Dame Beatrice did not repeat her offer to help finish planting the potatoes, and was walking briskly

homewards when she met Colonel May, the grandfather and guardian of Ursula, Dick and Sarah. He saluted by raising his walking-stick and stopped for a chat.

‘Mud on your shoes, Beatrice. Been for a cross-country ramble?’

‘No. I’ve been helping Mrs Mapsted to plant potatoes.’

‘Too early for potatoes. Good Friday is the day for that.’

‘I understood her to say that these were early potatoes.’

‘Queer business about her son. Got to the bottom of it yet?’

‘Not to the bottom of it, but we are still digging.’

‘I don’t understand the woman. Don’t understand her at all. Is she all there, do you suppose?’

‘Oh, yes, there is nothing wrong with her brain.’

‘Seems to lack feelings, though. Doesn’t seem at all cut up about John.’

‘I had noticed it.’

‘No mother-love. Can’t understand it. You’d think she’d be shockingly upset, but, so far as I can tell, she hasn’t turned a hair. And look at all those lies she told at the inquest.’

The one lie, if any.’

‘Well, why tell even one? She was on oath.’

‘It was a little doubtful, at the time, whether it *was* Mrs Mapsted who lied, but there is good reason now for being pretty certain that John Mapsted was not at home that night. Do you know anything about a man named Zozo, a gipsy?’

‘Had him up in front of the bench for poaching.’

‘What about horse-racing? There is reason to believe that he was a member of a very shady syndicate who substituted racehorses.’

‘Wouldn’t put it past him. Most of those chaps know how to make up vegetable dyes and are pretty handy with a pair of clippers. File the gees’ teeth, too, they do, you know, to avoid the appearance of age. Paint out stars and stockings — anything.’

‘But you’ve never heard of Zozo in that connection?’

‘Can’t say I have, and it’s not like you to ask leading questions. Is it very important?’

‘Not unless he killed John Mapsted.’

‘Eh? What? Mapsted? I thought that brute Percheron kicked his head in? Are you serious?’

‘Perfectly serious. Things are beginning to come out.’

‘And this fellow Zozo is mixed up in them?’

‘To what extent we don’t yet know, but the Seahampton police are prepared



to question him closely as to his movements on the night of John Mapsted's death.'

'Good heavens!'

'This information, meagre though it is, had better remain unpublished for the present.'

'Of course, of course! Shan't breathe a word to a soul!'

As Dame Beatrice knew the garrulous old gentleman too well to believe this, she passed on, certain that sooner or later the news would reach the proper quarter. Which quarter that was, she had very little doubt. The repercussions, she thought, might be interesting.

She had not gone far when there came behind her heavy footsteps, moving at what seemed to be an unaccustomed pace and accompanied by distressful breathing. Fairly certain that she knew who it was, she turned and, as she had expected, found herself again confronting the Colonel.

'Just thought of something!' he gasped. Dame Beatrice had expected this also, although not quite so soon.

'That fellow Grinsted. Did you know he once diddled old Mother Mapsted over a Pig?'

'She told me so.'

'She told me, too. Changed its colouring and sold it back to her. Made me think about it, your talking about gipsy horse-faking. What about Grinsted, eh?'

'There is something else I should like to know about Farmer Grinsted,' said Dame Beatrice. 'He keeps a racehorse, I am told.'

'Yes. Beautiful thing. Blue roan. Gentle as a lamb.'

'Have you encountered the animal, or do you describe its looks and character from hearsay?'

'I've seen it. Never known such an affectionate creature.'

'Extraordinary!'

'Yes, they're usually mettlesome and can be a bit difficult.'

'I didn't mean that. See here, my dear Colonel, I know you are the soul of discretion. What would you say if I told you that Miss Trowse, over at Hurst St. Johns, once described Farmer Grinsted's horse as being capable of savaging a man, with the added information that it would eat a rhinoceros if it could get at one? Incidentally, I wonder how much truth there was in the rumour that Miss Trowse was affiancé to John Mapsted?'

'There was talk about it, but what could the chap see in her? A very mannish woman and long in the tooth, too. Besides, she owns nothing but that string of

gone-back cart-horses and she hasn't a penny to bless herself with. They say she eats oats cooked and the gees eat 'em raw — out of the same nosebag, so to speak.'

'Interesting and pathetic, don't you think?'

'She should get a job. Plenty of jobs going in New Seahampton. I suppose she can type a bit — most women seem to — and lick stamps and so on?'

'I have no idea, but I expect she would rather live with her horses.'

'Yes, but she isn't going to, according to what I heard. She's going to sell up and go as kennel-maid to those Boxer-dog people over on the other side of Ferndown. If she does, I wonder whether there's any chance of getting a good puppy cheap? People ought to oblige old acquaintances, what?'

'You had better get Grinsted to arrange with Mr Zozo to camouflage a stolen puppy, then you might be able to get it for nothing except the gipsy's fee,' said Dame Beatrice, with a mirthless grin. The Colonel stared at her for a moment, and then said:

'I know nothing about that pig business don't you know, except what Mother Mapsted told me herself. Wanted to know whether she could go to law about it. I advised her to threaten Grinsted with a summons. Said I was prepared to back her up by swearing to the pig.'

'It was good of you to side with the widow and the orphan.'

'Can't stick Grinsted, surly brute,' said the Colonel. 'Well, you think over what I've told you. A fellow that will paint a pig will paint horses. If you believe Mapsted was murdered, there's your man for you.'

'Motive, Colonel?'

'What's motive got to do with it? The fellow would strangle his old mother if he thought it worth his while. Probably did, I shouldn't wonder. Suppose Mapsted had found out about this horse-faking business? Wouldn't that be motive enough for Grinsted to want to shut his mouth?'

'From inductive reasoning, Colonel, I think that Mapsted himself was a party to the horse-faking.'

'Well, that makes it all the more likely that Grinsted settled his hash. They must have had a row. When thieves fall out, you know...!'

'There's a great deal in that. I must think it over.'

'You'll find I'm about right. Well, as you already knew about the pig, I'll be getting back. By the way, if it wasn't a horse — and I can read between the lines, as well as the next man — what did kill John Mapsted?'

'Why not a great big wooden mallet?' asked Dame Beatrice lightly. The

Colonel looked at her reproachfully and sucked in his cheeks.

‘You know, I’m not at all sure that you’re a serious-minded woman,’ he said. ‘Well, I’ll be off. Just wanted to be helpful.’

He faced about and walked slowly towards his home. Dame Beatrice soon gained hers, and found her chauffeur George awaiting her with the car at the front of the house. He saluted in his formal, respectful fashion.

‘There’s been a telephone call, madam, while you were out, and Mrs Célestine took it and said you might be needing the car in a hurry.’

‘Thank you, George. I’d better go and see what it is.’

The message had come from the Seahampton Grammar School. Mr Turnbull had been found and Mr Bond preferred to say nothing more over the telephone. Dame Beatrice rang the school to say that she would come over at once. She left a message for Laura and got into the waiting car.

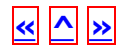
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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### The Mystery of Turnbull Deepens

*‘It is very difficult to impart, sir. It is very, very difficult to speak of. If ever you make me another visit, I will try to tell you.’*

Charles Dickens



‘W E became aware,’ said Mr Bond when Dame Beatrice arrived, ‘of a curious banging noise. It began directly we had finished the hymn, and proved extremely disconcerting during the rest of Prayers. In fact, before I gave out school notices, with which I usually conclude the morning Assembly, I got Mr Gadd to investigate. The noise came from underneath the stage.’

‘Yes?’ Dame Beatrice was only mildly interested.

‘It was perhaps a mistake on my part. The excitement of what was discovered caused — I refuse to call it disorder — a certain amount of ill-concealed excitement on the part of the boys. When Mr Gadd, assisted by Mr Spencer, removed the panel in front of the stage, Mr Turnbull, looking less than himself, crawled out into the middle of the front row of little boys, and, by so doing, aroused considerable and regrettable mirth.’

‘Yes, he must have caused quite a sensation!’

‘Mr Gadd and Mr Spencer helped him out through the swing doors into the corridor. I quelled the rising tide of speculation and discussion which followed his dramatic appearance, and gave out the usual notices.’

‘Very creditable,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘What had Mr Turnbull to say?’

‘But little. He was armed and well prepared.’

‘Doubtful, surely?’

‘He did indeed seem to be prepared with some sort of explanation. He said he had been set upon and robbed.’

‘We deal in quotations. These do, sometimes, of course, apply to everyday life.’

‘I agree. He said that he had done his best for the school.’

‘Meaning...?’

‘I gathered that the school might have suffered in some way if he had not contrived this reappearance.’

‘And what did you make of that?’

‘I thought he was perfectly right,’ said Mr Bond earnestly. ‘You see, one can’t afford to lose a teacher when the circumstances of his disappearance may lead to unwarrantable conclusions.’

‘I suppose not.’

‘Turnbull declared that he had done his best to get back to us. Attempts to find out more from him have failed. What have you to suggest?’

‘Nothing, at present,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I presume he is now in hospital?’

‘Nothing of the kind,’ said Mr Bond, with, perhaps, a touch of malice. ‘He is being looked after by some people in Old Seahampton named Abu. He seems in a highly nervous state. I think, myself, he should see a doctor. The house is that one out on Old Seahampton Point. As for Abu, it is a false name, I should imagine. I don’t mind telling you, Dame Beatrice, that there is a good deal more in this than has possibly met the eye, and I am not at all satisfied. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I dislike it. I connect this Turnbull business with the corpse which was discovered among the flowers.’

As Dame Beatrice could not see with what else he was likely to connect it, if he was going to connect it at all, she said no more than a civil farewell and took her leave.

Laura had been back at the Stone House for some time when Dame Beatrice arrived. She was openly delighted to hear the story of Mr Turnbull and the school Assembly.

‘We should have *eaten* anything like that, as kids,’ she said. She added, as an afterthought, ‘Was he all right? Had he been starved or knocked about, or anything?’

‘Mr Bond did not mention anything of the kind and I did not ask. I felt I was dismissed. I do not think Mr Bond enjoyed the experience of having a member of his staff upset the school Assembly. I do not think his full sympathy is with Mr Turnbull.’

Laura grinned, and said:

‘I’m not surprised. Schoolmasters are not expected to be chummy with people like Grinsted and the gipsy chap. Even to know Jed Nottingham is stretching the social circle a bit too wide, I expect, from Mr Bond’s point of view. When it came to Turnbull’s playing truant, or whatever it was, from

school, and then making a spectacle of himself crawling out of that glory-hole in front of five hundred boys, well, I expect the hairs on the nape of a headmaster's neck did tend to rise a bit.'

'Now, what about your own news?' asked Dame Beatrice. 'Did you gain anything of advantage from Miss Cofts?'

'Oh, Lord, yes! I was so taken with the story of Turnbull that I'd forgotten about the Cofts. Mrs Cofts' lonely rides on Viatka were to meet Jed Nottingham. *He* was riding the mare when she got that over-reach. No wonder Mrs Cofts couldn't explain it!'

'Did anything else transpire?'

'No, nothing that you'd bother about.'

Nothing more was said and bedtime came. At breakfast on the following morning another subject, still connected with Mr Turnbull, presented itself and was discussed.

'I'm certain I know the house Mr Bond meant,' said Laura. 'It's out there, on the Point, almost opposite the church.'

'Then let us interview the people called Abu,' suggested Dame Beatrice. 'I shall be glad to come with you.'

Laura was not sorry to be accompanied by her employer on this excursion. What reason Dame Beatrice would give for visiting the house on the Point she had no idea, and neither did Dame Beatrice offer any suggestions.

They arrived, driven by George, at eleven in the morning. Instead of going straight to the house, they went into the Blue Finn for sherry (for Dame Beatrice) and beer (for Laura) and there encountered Jed Nottingham, who was occupying a stool at the counter.

Laura, who had gone forward to place her orders, greeted him cautiously.

'Hullo, Jed.'

'Ah, it's you, Mrs Gavin. What will you have?'

'Nothing, at the moment, thanks. I'm on duty.'

Jed Nottingham glanced round.

'Oh, yes, I see,' he said. 'Do you want a tip for the Earl Stakes next week?'

'Not from you,' replied Laura, grinning.

'Why not, then? I could give you Chinwagga.'

Laura never knew (although she gave the credit, later on, to a great-grandmother of hers who, in her own day, had been admired for possessing the gift) why she made the reply she did.

'Because you're running Tennessee,' she said calmly, 'and, for once, you're

backing him.' Jed, who was raising his glass to his lips, jerked beer over his chin. He swore quietly, mopped his face and his pullover, and said:

'Tennessee? What, that brute of Cissie Gauberon's? Whatever made you think anybody would enter *him* for a race? It's all he can do to amble across country!'

'Oh, ah?' said Laura. She took up her two glasses and returned to Dame Beatrice. Jed finished his drink quickly and went out. Laura strolled over to the small bow window and saw him go down to the harbour. He put two fingers in his mouth, and whistled. Laura returned to the small table, sat down and lit a cigarette.

'Jed Nottingham has just hired a boat, I think,' she said. 'Mind if I toddle out to see where he's going?'

But she gained nothing from her short expedition. Jed was being ferried to the Yacht Club which, at high tide, was an island, so to speak, in its own right. She waited until he climbed aboard the moored cruiser and then went back to finish her beer.

'Don't know whether we ought to tackle the Abus while Jed's about,' she said. 'What is your idea?'

'As Mr Bond has been told that Mr Turnbull is at their house, I see no reason for secrecy, child. However, as Mr Nottingham seems to be mixed up, even if only slightly, in Mr Turnbull's affairs, it may be as well to possess our souls in patience.'

'Come to think of it,' said Laura, 'I'm a member of the Yacht Club myself. What about getting over to it and having a drink there and keeping an eye on his movements?'

'That, I think, would arouse more suspicion than if we went to the house on the Point.'

'Right. What about another sherry?'

Dame Beatrice thought that another sherry would be welcome. They moved to a table in the window and Laura kept unobtrusive watch. Nottingham did not reappear, so, to Laura's disappointment, Dame Beatrice suggested that she alone should visit the house, and that Laura should wait in the car when George had driven them both to the gate.

The short drive from the inn to the house was a bumpy, uncomfortable affair over grass sometimes tufted and sometimes smooth. This was followed by a grinding over sharp gravel. The car pulled up in front of a causeway too narrow to take it, and Dame Beatrice walked along this with shallow water lapping

gently on either side. The front door of the house faced the causeway and, before the visitor had a chance to knock or ring, it was opened by a young woman wearing jeans and a sloppy jumper which fell in folds over her hips. She was smoking a cigarette and was escorted by a water-spaniel.

‘Come right in, Mrs Turnbull,’ she said. ‘We wired you as soon as we could to see whether you couldn’t perhaps persuade Nat to talk. We can’t get a word out of him that makes sense. If you’ll take a sit-down in here...’ she ushered Dame Beatrice into a large, untidy room... ‘I’ll go get him and leave you together. I hardly thought you’d get here until tonight. You must have driven like Hades.’

‘Some people always fall on their feet,’ commented Laura, later. ‘What a bit of luck, her taking you for Turnbull’s mum! And what a good thing you didn’t let me go with you!’

At the time, Dame Beatrice felt that the proper thing to do was to break it to the young woman that she was not Mrs Turnbull but someone connected closely with the police. Mrs Abu, however, scarcely gave her the chance to explain herself, but shut her in with a resounding slam of the door.

About a quarter of an hour passed and then the door opened and Turnbull, with red-rimmed eyes and an unsteady gait, came in. He looked as sheepish and defiant as any adolescent boy called upon to explain an indefensible action to his mother. The sudden collapse of this expression and its immediate replacement by one of extreme horror caused Dame Beatrice to emit a cackle of such malevolence that Turnbull actually recoiled.

‘I thought... I was told...’ he stammered.

‘Ah, yes. A case of mistaken identity. I had little chance to explain to Mrs Abu who I was, and that little chance I did not take. Do sit down, Mr Turnbull, won’t you? I came, at some inconvenience, to see you.’

‘But I don’t see why. Is it something about the school Opening? I had nothing to do with that.’

‘The only opening it has to do with, is the opening in the front of the school stage. Now, Mr Turnbull...’ she waved a yellow claw to indicate that he was not to interrupt her... ‘what made you hide?... from whom were you hiding?... why did you not continue to hide?’

‘I must have got drunk,’ said Turnbull. ‘I don’t remember anything about it. I couldn’t think where I was until I heard the boys singing the hymn. Then it came to me that I was shut in under the stage, and that I’d better get out before I starved or before the air gave out.’



‘That,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘is not true. You *were* in hiding. You came to school at the usual time, in the usual way, and went into hiding underneath the stage. Why, Mr Turnbull, did you do that? Who, or what, do you fear?’

‘It’s no darn business of yours!’ said Turnbull, beginning to shout. ‘I was all right until that fool of a caretaker fastened up the front of the stage. I’d rather be beaten up than suffocated.’

‘Who proposes to beat you up? Mr Nottingham?’

Turnbull swore at her, and then demanded:

‘How do *you* come into it, you nosey-parkering old busybody?’

‘*Touché!*’ said Dame Beatrice, with an eldritch cackle. ‘I am consulting psychiatrist to the Home Office, dear child, and I am helping to track down a murderer.’

‘Oh!’ said Turnbull, deflated.

‘Did you ever know a man named Mapsted?’

‘Oh, the chap who was kicked on the head. I read about that in the local paper. I thought it was brought in as accidental death. Wasn’t it supposed to have been one of his own horses that did it?’

‘We know better now. The police believe that Mapsted was not killed by a horse but by a heavy mallet from your own tool store.’

‘What?’ said Turnbull in a whisper. ‘But that was nothing to do with me!’

‘So, you see,’ went on Dame Beatrice in a chatty tone, ‘it might be well for you to think things over. The only fingerprints on the mallet are your own. We do not,’ she hastened to add (for Turnbull looked as though he might faint), ‘pay *undue* attention to that fact, but it has its own importance.’

She rose to go, and as she opened the door — for Turnbull made no move — she came face to face with Mrs Abu.

‘Oh, you’re not *going*, Mrs Turnbull!’ exclaimed the hostess, as Dame Beatrice closed the door behind herself.

‘I am going, because (I regret to have to confess) I am *not* Mrs Turnbull.’

‘Not? Oh, but she said she was coming. Can’t she manage it, then?’

‘I really have no idea, and I do beg your pardon for intruding on you like this, and under false pretences at that.’

‘Think nothing of it,’ said the young woman. ‘I’m quite used to being bounced in on. You’re a friend of Nat’s, and that’s all that matters to me. You *are* a friend of Nat’s, I take it?’

‘You are entitled to take it that I am. At the moment, and for, at any rate, the next few days, if not longer, I am probably the best friend he has in the world,

and when I am gone I shall be infinitely obliged if you will tell him so. It may help to ease his mind.'

'Say, what *has* he been up to? He tells me he's lost his job, but what's behind it?'

'I wish I knew. I was hoping you could tell me.'

'Not a clue, and you can't force people's confidence, can you? All I know is that he came along here and said the headmaster had told him to take indefinite leave of absence and that he would probably get a letter from the Governors in due course. He translated this as being given the push, and that's all I can tell you. He seems scared to show his nose outside the door. I can't make him out.'

'I wonder whether you would mind telling me how long you have known him?'

'We've been friends for about a year now, through the yachting. He's crewed for me once or twice, and I helped him a bit with his boat when he was building her. I got out the plans and specifications and things. My father was in the boatbuilding line, you see. I'm glad of a man's company since Abu went back to Egypt, but there's nothing between Nat and me. Once bitten, twice shy, that's how I feel about that.'

'Do you know a man named Nottingham, Mrs Abu?'

'A bit. Nasty bit of work, he always struck me as. He's another member of the Yacht Club. That's the extent of my acquaintance with him. Nat's been meeting him a bit lately, I believe. I was with a party in the Blue Finn one evening, and the two of them were there with another man I've never seen before.'

'Only one other?'

'Yes, the three were together at the bar.'

'Can you describe the other man?'

'I guess not. He was just one of those types. Looked — not horsy, like Jed Nottingham, but somehow — well, you could tell he lived in the country.'

'Of medium height with a rather pale face for a countryman and remarkable, sad, dreamy, far-gazing, large eyes?'

'Do you know him?'

'He is a farmer who lives just outside the village of Wandles Parva. His name is Grinsted.'

'That's right. Now I remember, Nat called him that. He said, "What about you, Grinsted? What'll you have?" Funny how things come back to you.'

'Yes. Thank you very much, Mrs Abu. You don't know, I suppose, exactly

how long this association has been going on?’

‘Only a matter of three or four months, that I actually know about. Nat dropped a packet over some steeplechase or other last autumn. I know he did because he tried to borrow from me, but I hadn’t got it. Later on, when I asked him, he said it was all right; Jed Nottingham had lent it to him.’

‘Jed Nottingham had lent it to him... I see. Well, goodbye, Mrs Abu. If you can get him to tell you anything more, it will be to his advantage if you will communicate with me, or with the Chief Constable of the county, or with the Seahampton police station. Here is my card. I will put the Chief Constable’s address on the back of it.’

She fished for a pencil, scribbled with it and handed the card to the young woman. When she reached the end of the causeway she looked back. Mrs Abu was still standing in the open doorway.

‘He’ll *have* to talk,’ said the Superintendent over the telephone. ‘I’m going out there at once. Now that that mallet’s been found and tested, this business ought to be cleared up, and he’s got to help us, silly young fool!’

Dame Beatrice rang off. An hour later a call came through to the Stone House. Turnbull had fled from the house on the Point. He had gone out ostensibly to buy tobacco, but had not returned, and Mrs Abu could tell the police nothing more.

‘And I’m certain she’s telling the truth, madam,’ concluded the Superintendent. ‘I’ve dealt with too many witnesses not to be pretty certain when they’re lying. She doesn’t know where he is and he’s confided nothing to her. Now we shall have to set to work again to find him. One thing, he can’t have got far.’

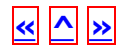
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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### No Light on a Dark Horse

*‘When the wind whistles cold on the moor of a night,  
Tom Pearce’s old mare doth appear ghostly white.’*

Song



DAME Beatrice did not share all the Superintendent’s views. She did not think that Turnbull would have to talk. She *did* agree that he could not have gone far. She was terribly afraid that he was dead, and confided as much to Laura.

‘Tell George to get out the car at once,’ she said. ‘We had better contact Mrs Abu and get her story at first hand.’

In Old Seahampton they parked the car by the churchyard wall and crossed the uneven stretch of grass to the house on the Point. Mrs Abu could tell them no more than they knew already. What she added was mere speculation.

‘I’d no idea he was going to leave,’ she said. ‘I offered to get the cigarettes for him but he said he wanted a stroll. Of course, I did get the idea that he was very much put out by your coming to see him. He seemed all of a fidget when I went back into the house, and he blamed me rather for letting you in. Just as if I knew you weren’t his ma! After all, I’d been quite expecting her, and I’ve never met her, any more than I’d met you, and the age would be about right.’

‘You flatter me,’ said Dame Beatrice, with a leer.

‘He said,’ went on Mrs Abu, ‘that if *you* could muscle your way in — his words, not mine — so could even more dangerous people.’

‘Yes. Yes, I see.’

Laura had her own ideas about Turnbull.

‘We’d better try the house by the lasher,’ she said, ‘where I followed him before. That’s where he’s gone to ground, I’m certain.’

They re-crossed the green and came to the plank bridge. Once over this, they came in sight of a small bungalow. The garden was overgrown and needed weeding and the building had a boarded-up window and a general air of neglect.

They went to the front door and Laura knocked. The door swung open, almost precipitating her into the hall. She recovered her balance and stepped back.

‘Bit fishy, don’t you think?’ she enquired. ‘I’ll bellow first, before we go in.’

‘Very wise,’ said Dame Beatrice. Laura lifted up her voice in a powerful and musical *yodel* on the word Turnbull. There was no response. She tried again, but the bungalow appeared to be empty.

‘I don’t like it,’ she said. ‘My flesh creeps. Let’s go back and borrow one of George’s spanners. “By the pricking of my thumbs” and so forth, you know.’

‘If what I think is true, there’s no danger, child.’ With this, Dame Beatrice walked into the tiny hall. Turnbull’s body was in the kitchen. The weapon, a heavy spanner, was lying beside it. Laura turned green.

‘Get back to George and tell him to get the Superintendent,’ said Dame Beatrice briskly. ‘I’ll stay here until he comes.’

Laura went out to the car. George listened respectfully to her news, and then he said:

‘If you’ve no objection, madam, I think it would be best if you would take the message and leave me to back up Dame Beatrice?’

‘Oh, blow!’ said Laura.

‘It really would be the better plan, madam.’ His respectful tones did not alter but there was a masculine determination in his eyes with which Laura, Amazon though she was, could not but sympathize. He picked a heavy spanner out of his tool-kit. ‘This, madam, will be quite a good argument to convince a gent who decides to turn awkward. Murderers sometimes lurk about.’

‘All right. Push along, then, George. I shouldn’t think he’d risk having a pop at us. He’ll give us time to clear off, or so he thinks. Anyway, you never know, so I shan’t start the car until you get to the bridge.’

‘Very good, Mrs Gavin.’ He strode away, a stocky, reliable figure, swinging the spanner as he went. Laura got into the car, and, as he disappeared, she started the engine.

Superintendent Humblederry was interested in the whereabouts of Turnbull, as he indicated when Laura arrived.

‘Much obliged to you, madam,’ he said. ‘I seem to have wasted a couple of officers down the Sound, but no matter. You say the body is definitely at this bungalow?’

‘Well, it was, when I left it about ten minutes ago.’

‘Very good, madam. We’ll get down there right away.’

Laura waited for the police car to precede her, then, with a sigh of

frustration, she let in her clutch and followed. She pulled up outside the church and lit a cigarette. She did not know how long it would be before Dame Beatrice and George were free to return home. After a minute or so she changed to the back seat of the car and read a book which George had left in the glove compartment. It turned out to be a book by Elizabeth David on Mediterranean food, and she was soon completely absorbed in it.

‘Lady,’ said a plaintive voice at the partly open window by the driver’s seat. ‘I’ve got a horse here. Will you help me to get him away?’

It was the gipsy. Laura, startled, looked up.

‘Push off,’ she said promptly. ‘The police are here.’

‘Lady, I know. Won’t you help me with the horse?’

‘No. Go away at once!’

She was not afraid of him, but the green in front of the church was quite deserted and the thought of the murdered man was not a pleasant one. It was still daylight. That was one good thing. But, while she was comforting herself with this thought, the gipsy put his hand over the top of the window and felt for the handle. He lowered the window and framed his head in the opening.

‘You’ve got to help me, lady,’ he said quietly.

‘Hey!’ said Laura. ‘Leave that handle alone and get away from here at once! I tell you there’s a police car in the offing. Don’t be a fool.’

The gipsy withdrew his head, wrenched open the door of the car, whipped into the driver’s seat, and, before Laura realized what his plan was, the car was in motion. It bumped off the rough grass by the churchyard wall and on to the little road which led past the stables at the back of the Blue Finn.

‘And if you beat me over the head, lady, you will only pile us both up,’ said the gipsy into the windscreen.

‘What I shall do is to yell blue murder,’ retorted Laura. The gipsy’s only reply to this was to accelerate and they bounced along the uneven and narrow lane, past the inn and out on to the New Seahampton road. On this they went so fast that Laura realised that all the shouting in the world would not help her. Her only hope was that the car would be held up by a policeman. This, however, did not occur. They roared through New Seahampton past the grammar school and on towards Southampton. But at crossroads, five miles out, the car swung away towards the forest, and, from then on, it was clear to Laura that the gipsy intended to keep to unfrequented roads.

Neither he nor she exchanged a word for the next five or six miles. By this time they were crossing a stretch of open heath broken here and there by birch

trees or oaks. Once they encountered a herd of ponies and in a glade there were two or three deer. It began to get dark. Laura cast about for a way to end the journey. It was becoming nightmarish. Once they passed a turning to Wandles Parva, and, after that, every mile took her farther from home.

At last the gipsy spoke.

‘Nearly there, lady.’

‘And where is “there”? I wonder?’ said Laura. He laughed softly and did not answer. The open heath ended and they were among trees. The gipsy had to put on the lights. The road narrowed. Dark giants of oak flung enormous shadows. Gleaming beech-trunks swung suddenly across the way. A thick copse of holly, black in the headlamps, swirled by.

But, at last, the drive was over. The car pulled up beside a group of pines. As it slowed to a halt, Laura acted. The edge of her strong right hand took the gipsy at the left side of the neck. It was a blow which her husband had taught her. She had put on her driving gloves, but, even so, she felt the shock right up her arm. The gipsy slumped. Laura wrenched open the door of the car, seized the man and tried to pull him out. He was much heavier than she had supposed, and, apart from that, she got him wedged and could not move him. Every moment she expected his cronies to turn up, and, at last, panting, she gave up the struggle. Her aim now was to get away from him. At any moment (unless she had killed him) he might begin to come to. She immobilized the car by turning off the ignition and pocketing the key, and then decided to turn back and get on to the main road to Brockenhurst, the nearest place, if her calculations were correct, where she could get a train or hire a car. She leaned over the gipsy’s awkwardly-slumped body, picked up the electric torch which was always kept in the car and had just begun to pick her way along the narrow forest road when she heard the whinny of a horse.

She thought at first that it might be a forest pony, but then she heard a soft thud as it pawed the ground, so she decided that it really *was* a horse, and was probably tethered. She turned the torch in the direction from which the sounds came. The horse whinnied again. Laura, certain in her own mind that it was the animal which the gipsy had mentioned before he kidnapped her, was conscious of a feeling of excitement. She groped her way through the trees and almost precipitated herself into a deep ditch.

‘Good heavens! This must be Campbury Rings!’ she thought. ‘They’ve hidden the horse among the earthworks!’

She descended the steep slope and, keeping the light of her torch shining on

to the ground, she clicked her tongue and the horse answered with another whinny. She soon found him. He was saddled and bridled, ready for instant departure. She fumbled for, and found, the end of his tether and freed him. Then she led him along the bottom of the prehistoric ditch to where an upward-sloping ramp took them both on to the top of a low plateau which had formed the inner sanctuary of the Iron Age fort.

Here, for a moment, she stood still. The horse, as docile as a spaniel, stood, too, blowing gently through his nostrils. Without the use of the torch Laura could see nothing. With it she was afraid of attracting the attention of the gipsy or his friends. The lesser of two evils seemed to be the latter, so, keeping the light shining downwards, as far as possible, she led the horse across the top of the fortified mound and, by great good luck, came immediately to a place where part of the earthworks had either crumbled or had been destroyed. On this side, too, she found herself clear of the trees. Still leading the horse, she walked on by the light of the torch, only hoping that the battery would last until she reached a road. Half the time she wondered whether she was dreaming.

They came out at last upon a road of sorts and followed it. Laura was getting tired, and had very little idea, by this time, of where she was. The late evening was chilly, she was desperately hungry, and she had begun to envisage herself wandering all night in the forest. Suddenly, strongly brilliant headlights behind her cast enormous shadows of herself and the horse upon the road and over the heather. The horse began to dance. Laura tried to soothe him. The car sounded a respectful toot on the horn. The horse flung up his head and Laura had hard work to hold him. She got him to the side of the road, so that the car could go by, but, instead, it pulled up, and a voice with a transatlantic accent said:

‘Say! What goes on?’

‘Do pass me,’ said Laura desperately. ‘I’ve left you room.’

‘You seem kind of benighted,’ said the voice. The headlights dimmed. There was the sound of a car door being slammed. Laura hung on grimly to the horse and faced him round towards the middle of the road. A young man appeared in the light of the headlamps, a silhouette. ‘Have you lost the rest of the hunting-party?’ he enquired.

‘No. I’m taking the horse back home. I say, though, I wish you’d tell me whereabouts I am. It got dark, and I want to get — well, Brockenhurst would do.’

‘You’re way off your route, sister. Say, look. There’s quite a cute little roadhouse about two miles ahead. Maybe, if I went slowly, you could mount the



mustang and follow me to it. There are stables there, like in most of the hotels around here. You could put the gee up for the night and ring your friends. I certainly do not appreciate the thought of leaving you here.'

'It's very kind of you,' said Laura, 'but I expect I'll manage. About two miles, you say? Thanks very much. Good night.' She backed the horse father into the heather. The young American said:

'Aw, now,' in a disappointed tone, and returned to his car. The door slammed, he let in the clutch and drove slowly past her and the horse. Laura led the horse on to the road and resumed her lonely pilgrimage. Half a mile farther on she saw the tail-lamps of a car and realized that it must be the helpful American again. He flickered the lamps to let her know that he had seen the beam of her torch and then drove on again. At last, to Laura's relief, the forest drive met a main road, and there, twinkling like a Christmas tree, were the lights of a big road-house. The horse she had been leading was Farmer Grinsted's Iceland Blue.

'So now we go over and collect the horse and your car,' said Laura, 'taking a posse of peelers with us.'

It was morning. A telephone message from the road-house on the previous evening had brought George, in Dame Beatrice's larger car, to the rescue. The horse had been stabled at the road-house, the helpful American had been thanked and had insisted upon giving Laura cocktails and dinner, and Laura had given Dame Beatrice a lively account of the evening's adventure.

'So you and George came back to the church and found the car and me both missing,' she remarked.

'We could not make out what had happened. However, having looked everywhere he or I could think of, George walked into New Seahampton, hired a car and a driver (so that the hired car could return as soon as it had deposited us) and we came back here, only to find that there was still no sign of you.'

'I'm terribly sorry. You must have had a pretty worrying evening. The only thing is that, for once, I really couldn't help it. I mean, I couldn't possibly envisage that gipsy fellow having the cool sauce to drive off with me like that, could I?'

'No, you could not, but we were most relieved to get your telephone message from the road-house. I wonder what was behind that kidnapping? He could not really have needed your help with the horse. I think you had better not leave this house for a bit. I do not think it will take me very much longer to get this affair cleared up, but, until it *is* cleared up and the right people are under lock and key, you will be much safer within doors.'

‘But why on earth should I be in more danger than you are?’

‘Because,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘it seems to me that, judging from the internal evidence, you know something that I do *not* know. What that something is I have yet to find out.’

‘But what *could* I know that you don’t? I’ve told you everything I’ve done, and I’ve reported all the conversations I’ve had ever since I first heard of John Mapsted’s death.’

‘I know, I know. But there must be *something*. Kidnapping is a serious offence.’

‘You don’t think the gipsy intended to murder me?’ Laura sounded interested, not alarmed.

‘Not the gipsy, no.’

Laura raised her eyebrows, but Dame Beatrice chose to be uninformative. Laura turned plaintive.

‘Something went wrong with the plan, then? I’ll swear there was nobody at that camp but myself and the gipsy — Oh, and, of course, the horse. But, look here, the gipsy couldn’t have known that I should be alone in the car at that time. We didn’t even know ourselves. It should have been George, if you remember.’

‘That lends colour to my theory. They were not expecting to capture you yesterday. The gipsy saw his chance, as he thought, and took it, but had no opportunity to let his friends know what was afoot.’

‘Bad luck on him. Forewarned is forearmed, so far as I’m concerned. All right. I’ll be careful.’

‘Good. Well, now for Campbury Rings and, we hope, the gipsy Zozo.’

‘I only hope I haven’t done him any lasting damage. I hit him pretty hard. He went all of a slump on me. It’s a blow that can kill, and I gave him of my best.’

George drove them to the road-house and Laura claimed the horse. She was in riding clothes and proposed to take him to the Blue Finn. This was a plan approved of by Dame Beatrice, as two policemen had been put on guard over the stabling there. Laura was somewhat put out to discover that Paddy Donegal was waiting at the road-house for her and was to accompany her through the forest to Old Seahampton.

‘Good heavens!’ she said reproachfully to Dame Beatrice. ‘I don’t need Paddy to protect me! After all, nobody who matters to us knows that the horse is here.’

‘Nevertheless, as Mr Donegal has kindly agreed to escort you, it would seem churlish to refuse his good offices,’ said Dame Beatrice blandly. Paddy was on

Barb, hired, to Cissie's surprise and (Dame Beatrice was sure) to her consternation, from the Elkstonehunt stables because it was a horse to which Iceland Blue, in his capacity as Tennessee, must at times have been stable-mate.

Laura knew better than to argue with her employer. She and Paddy rode off to Old Seahampton, and Dame Beatrice, driven by George and accompanied by the Superintendent, who, like Paddy, had been waiting at the road-house, went off to Campbury Rings. There was no sign of Zozo, dead or alive, but the Superintendent remarked there should be little difficulty in pulling him in.

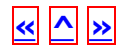
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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### They Ended the Ride

*‘I will still, however, tell you how to find the golden horse, if you will do as I bid you.’*

The Brothers Grimm



A petrified Cissie Gauberon denied all knowledge of Zozo and his methods. Dame Beatrice told her curtly that the police were not concerned at the moment with the crookedness which had been going on in connection with the race-horses, but had other business in hand, and invited her to tell all she knew. Cissie would say nothing until Dame Beatrice decided to ask the Superintendent to withdraw while she talked with her alone.

‘I never had anything to do with the Turf side of the business while John was alive,’ said Cissie at last. ‘He and Jed Nottingham ran it between them, I think.’

‘And Farmer Grinsted?’ asked Dame Beatrice.

‘I didn’t know he was in it. He must be new to it, I think, if he’s mixed up with it at all. I should think I would have known if he was one of them. You see — well—’

Her tone did not carry conviction and Dame Beatrice cut her short by asking another question.

‘You remember the man from the airport who came to warn Mr Mapsted shortly before his death?’

‘I heard about that from Mrs Mapsted,’ said Cissie, thoroughly nervous.

‘Did you think he was talking about this substitution of horses?’

‘What else could anybody think?’

‘That is not an answer.’

‘All right, then. I did think it was about the horses. Lots of the men at the airfield liked to have a bit on, and I believe John used to give them a tip now and again.’

‘In other words, whether a horse named, we’ll say, Ohio, really was Ohio and not Tennessee. To put it bluntly, whether the horse was to win the race or lose it.’

‘Something of the sort.’

‘It sounds a dangerous practice to me, if he wanted to keep his deeds secret.’

‘There was a small syndicate in Lymington or somewhere, I believe,’ said Cissie. ‘They used to share their winnings with John. It was one of the ways he had for keeping off the rocks.’

‘How did Mr Nottingham come into it?’

‘He bought a half-share in Tennessee, Criollo and Appaloosa. They had to have more than one horse to make the substitution possible if they were to cover all eventualities, and John couldn’t afford to buy them on his own.’

‘What about Farmer Grinsted’s Iceland Blue?’

Cissie did not reply. Laura and Paddy appeared at that moment riding Criollo and Appaloosa which they had brought back from the stables at the Blue Finn, leaving Iceland Blue still under police surveillance.

‘Wonder how Cissie feels about it all?’ said Laura, when Paddy and Cissie had rubbed down and stabled the pair, and Laura and Dame Beatrice were alone. ‘Incidentally, the Superintendent’s men who are in charge over there were quite agreeable and said their orders covered the removal of any horses except the blue roan, so I thought we might as well bring those two back.’

‘Yes, they will be useful here. There would be no point now in leaving them at the Blue Finn. Well, I have obtained nothing from Miss Gauberon, and the Superintendent is anxious to talk to her. You, my dear child, are to accompany Sir Mallory, who will be at our house by now, to Campbury Rings to bring back the other car. You have its ignition key, I believe?’

‘Yes, I have. All right. I suppose we shall go in a police car driven by some ham-fisted Hampshire policeman. I hope that at least I can drive your car home. By the way, was Zozo all right when you and the Superintendent got to Campbury Rings?’

‘I suppose so. He was not there. The police are looking for him.’

‘Are they? Not very surprising. When we do get to the bottom of all that’s been going on, do you really think we shall find out who murdered John and now Turnbull?’

‘I know quite well who killed them, and Jenkinson, too.’

‘Spoof? You’re going to make the murderer give himself — or is it herself? — away? Not cricket.’

‘Neither is murder, no matter what its reason. Go along to Campbury Rings, please, and get the car. Sir Mallory has already touched the hooter of *his* car and is ready to go with you.’

‘All this police escort,’ grumbled Laura, but she enjoyed the trip as she and the Chief Constable, behind the broad backs and thick red necks of two bucolic policemen, drove through the spring-time of the forest, past tenderly-unfurling bracken fronds and the first brilliant green of the hawthorns; past the tiny red and the tasselled catkins of hazel; beside beeches whose long copper buds were beginning to break; past sleepy oak and great-branched elm; past black-tipped ash and evergreen, legendary pine. Here and there, where soft banks heaved like the long, green graves of giants, the first primroses had appeared, and by the side of little brown streams the kingcup leaves were lush, although the butter-golden flowers were still to come.

The Chief Constable was, by inclination, a meditative man and Laura, whose mind, although few would have guessed it, was that of a poet, had forgotten the nature of their errand by the time they reached the clearing flanked by pines where Iron Age warriors had made their entrenched fort. She came back to earth at the sight of Dame Beatrice’s car abandoned some fifty yards or so beyond the ditch. The gipsy, as she already knew, had disappeared.

‘Glad I didn’t kill him,’ she said. ‘I wonder where he went?’

‘We’ll find him,’ said the Chief Constable. ‘Our best plan will be to drive into Old Seahampton and talk to the landlord of the Blue Finn. You say he’s known there. Anyway, whether they can help us or not, we’ll soon pick him up. That’s one job the police can do better than anybody else. Now, then, if you’ve got the ignition key, one of my men can drive you back in Dame Beatrice’s car. Apart from a certain amount of mud from his boots, the fellow doesn’t seem to have damaged it.’

‘Good heavens, I don’t want a policeman with me! The village will think I’m under arrest!’ said Laura. She got into the car, waved to the Chief Constable and drove back to the Stone House. Her employer was there to greet her.

‘Ah,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘I perceive that, as usual, you have shown a naughty spirit of independence. However, since you have arrived here safe and whole, we will say no more about it.’

Concerned for Laura’s safety, however, she sent her to spend the weekend in London, where the Gavins had a flat in Dame Beatrice’s house.

When they had dined, Gavin said, with a grin, ‘Now tell me all about everybody concerned, and I’ll do the logic and tell you all the answers.’

‘You *do* fancy yourself, don’t you?’

‘Naturally. I’m good at solving problems. Didn’t I solve the problem of how to get you to marry me?’

‘Well, that was only a problem because I didn’t want to hand myself over, lock, stock and barrel, to a husband. I’ve always been a self-sufficient type. Still, it’s not so bad now I’m getting used to it.’

‘Many thanks. Come on, then. The dope, please, and big gobs of it.’

‘Well, you know most of it already.’

‘Never mind that. I’ll stop you if I’ve heard it before, so fire away.’

He leaned back and prepared to listen. Laura clasped her large, shapely hands round one knee and rocked herself gently backward and forward as she talked.

‘I take it,’ she said, ‘that the murderer is somebody I’ve met and probably talked to, and I also take it that he or she is somebody connected with horses. I’d like to think it was that beastly Grinsted, but I don’t suppose he’s worse than others.’

Gavin nodded, took out his cigar, studied the ash on it and nodded again before he put it back.

‘There are three riding-stables near, or fairly near, the Stone House, but as John Mapsted and Jenkinson both came from the same one, it looks as though either Cissie Gauberon or old Mrs Mapsted is guilty. Now, while I wouldn’t put much past old Mrs Mapsted, whose morals are as twisty as one of her porker’s tails, I can’t see her murdering her own son.’

‘I don’t really know the old lady, but it seems unlikely that she would.’

‘But she could, and probably did, dope out Jenkinson. If she did, we shall never prove it unless she confesses, and, even then, I doubt whether they could bring it in as murder. They’d simply conclude that old age had clouded her brain. Well, that brings us to Cissie Gauberon, but, somehow, I can’t believe Cissie hit John on the head with a mallet.’

‘Never mind about what you can’t believe. Let’s have the facts. Miss Gauberon certainly gained by Mapsted’s death, I take it, and if she murdered him she may have had to rub out Jenkinson, too, to cover her tracks.’

‘Yes, I can see that. Jenkinson could have rumbled something. The trouble is, you see, that John Mapsted couldn’t have been killed where he was found — that is, in Percheron’s stable. That is established by the time the horse made his fuss. Now, to chuck the body in there, you’d need a lot more strength than Cissie’s got. Besides, the mallet came from Seahampton Grammar School. I just simply can’t see any connection between Cissie Gauberon and that school. In fact, she *couldn’t* have got that mallet.’

‘Has it been proved beyond doubt that it was done with the mallet, though? I

didn't know that it had. Never mind. What comes next?'

'Who, not what. Let's take Jed Nottingham.'

'I can't see why we should. He's a fairly bad hat, if I'm any judge of a fellow man, and he might join in gang warfare, but I doubt very much whether he'd care to operate on his own. He might act to save his own skin, though.'

'He's mixed up in the whole thing, anyway.'

'He's in with the syndicate, certainly, but that doesn't necessarily mean he's guilty of murder.'

'All right, then. That brings us to Paddy Donegal. Do you really see Paddy as a murderer?'

'No, if you put it like that. The trouble is, you know, Laura, that we don't really know what makes people commit murder. The gains are usually so little, and the risks are always so great. No murderer can really be sane, whatever the law may decide.'

Laura sighed. 'It's no good,' she said. 'I can't believe that any of these people committed murder.'

'You can't believe it because, fundamentally, you think everybody is as decent and as level-headed as you are. That isn't a fact, Laura. If only you could realise it, you're tons better than most of the people one meets.'

'All the same,' said Laura obstinately, 'I don't see Paddy as a murderer.'

'All right, then. Who comes next?'

'Well, Merial, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, yes. That dim woman over at Linghurst Parva. Wasn't there some story that she was engaged, or was expecting to be engaged, to Mapsted?'

'There certainly seems to have been some sort of understanding between them, but whether it was *that* sort we don't know. The reports are contradictory. She herself denies it now.'

'Why should she deny it if it were true?'

'Heaven knows. There should be some explanation. The denial might be because she's got some guilty knowledge about his death.'

'Well, we can't get any farther than that at present. What does the Dame think of her?'

'I don't think she knows much about her. I've just realized something, though. That mallet. *Cissie* had no connection with Turnbull or the school, but Jed Nottingham had. He told me once that he was an Old Boy, and Turnbull was, too.'

'We've decided that he's not the type, though. Not that you can go by that, of



course. What about Turnbull himself?’

‘Motive? There was something fishy about him, or he wouldn’t have got himself mixed up with that gang of fakers, but I can’t see any reason for his wanting to kill John Mapsted. Besides, now that he himself has been killed, well, I mean, there surely wouldn’t be *two* murderers in such a small area? And, anyhow—’

‘Yes?’

‘I’m as certain as I can be that there is one murderer and one manslaughterer.’

‘Never heard the word, but I know what you mean. But, you see, my difficulty is this: nobody but Turnbull, surely, would have thought of using that mallet, if it *was* used. If I had had charge of the case, I should have taken a long and thoughtful look at Turnbull.’

‘Yes, I know, but you *can’t* connect Turnbull with murder, really you can’t — especially now!’

‘Illogical. Well, who else can there possibly be? What about that farmer chap you mentioned first of all?’

‘Grinsted? Yes, he *could* be a murderer, I’m certain, but I can’t see why he *should* be. I mean, I know he’s been mixed up in all the jiggery-pokery, and I heard there was trouble once about the *sale* of a horse, but... Oh! Good heavens! So that’s it!’

At that moment the telephone rang. Laura took the call and popped her head in five minutes later.

‘It was Mrs Croc.’ she announced. ‘It sounds as though the case will soon be all cleared up, and — what do you think? Not only Turnbull, but another master at the school was mixed up in that business of substituting the racehorses.’

‘Oh, the brains behind *that* side of it were those of Mr Spencer, the mathematics master at Seahampton Grammar School. I realized that,’ said Gavin, ruining Laura’s climax. ‘Don’t you remember he helped Turnbull build the boat, and sometimes went sailing with him? If you ask me, it’s a mercy that black sheep among schoolmasters are comparatively few, for, like doctors and lawyers, they have trained minds, special aptitudes and considerable facilities — some of them — if they decide to take to crime. Have you, for instance, ever considered that in most school laboratories there must be enough poison to finish off the whole staff and most of the boys? As for the dirty running of racehorses, I should think that to gull the betting public must have been rather fun for a chap like that.’

‘Personally,’ said Laura, ‘I couldn’t care less how much money the betting public is diddled out of. The sooner people realize just what a mug’s game betting is, the better, I should say — no play upon words intended. I’ll tell you what I think. I think John Mapsted died because he turned scared and began to talk of giving the game away — and Turnbull the same.’

‘Why should Mapsted do such a thing if he were sitting pretty with the rest of the bunch?’ demanded Gavin. ‘It was different for a schoolmaster like Turnbull, who’d got his reputation to lose.’

‘I suppose he got wind up when that chap from the airfield came and had that row with him,’ said Laura. ‘Oh, and I expect that the policeman’s warning got him rattled, too. John may not have been mixed up in a smuggling racket, but he wouldn’t have wanted the police taking too much interest in him. If you ask *me*, John Mapsted was all right on a horse, but he couldn’t stand up to tough people. You could tell that his mother ruled him, and he couldn’t even refuse Merial Trowse when she Leap-Yeared him in 1952, either.’

‘When she did *what*?’

‘Well, it stands to reason that’s what must have happened,’ declared Laura stoutly. ‘If it wasn’t like that, why did she repudiate the engagement after John was dead? She was afraid old Mrs Mapsted, who’s quite malicious in a humorous sort of way, would blow the gaff and make her a laughing stock. That’s obvious.’

As these were statements which could scarcely be proved or disproved, her hearer did not challenge them. Instead, like a wise man, he changed the subject.

‘Another thing: to my mind the most astonishing feature of the business is the way those schoolmasters tested the mallet, found traces of blood and human hair, and did not at once inform the police.’

‘I know. Mr Simkin, I gather from the Dame, is so much engrossed in his own subject that nothing else is quite real to him, because, from his point of view, it’s irrelevant. The other two knew that, once a scientific conclusion had been established, he would forget all about the matter unless (as in this case) something happened to remind him. Turnbull and Spencer did not go to the police for the best of reasons, I expect — they had guilty knowledge of what had happened to Jenkinson. I bet you anything you like that Spencer had something to do with putting Jenkinson’s body among those plants and flowers. The way I look at it is this: placing the body where they did, meant that they had no idea that Jenkinson was dying. You know, he used to do a lot of his drinking in New Seahampton, and there’s a pub not far from the school. Q.E.D.’

‘I hardly think so, my love.’

‘Well, didn’t we tell you what Sir Mallory told us about it? — the light left on in the flat, and the wood-shavings that the caretaker had to clear up? I’ve thought it over, and I’ve come to the conclusion that they decided they’d have a joke on the headmaster. Rather a poor show, I call it.’

Tell me more,’ said Gavin, unconvinced, but interested, as always, in the workings of Laura’s mind. ‘How did they get hold of Jenkinson, and when?’

‘I’m telling you. He must have collapsed in that public house near the school. The masters often drop in there for a drink in the dinner hour. Their idea would be that he was simply blind tight and had passed out. Spencer then thought of this idea of annoying the headmaster by having Jenkinson come to in the middle of the official Opening, so they smuggled him to the school in Spencer’s car, parked him in Turnbull’s tool shed, made that mess in the flat to keep the caretaker occupied, and left the light on to attract his attention. That was to get him out of the way while they planted Jenkinson among the flowers. I can see *that* all right. What I can’t understand is that whoever killed John Mapsted should have returned the mallet to the school. After all, he’d only to wind a bit of chain or something round it and drop it into Seahampton harbour. I suppose Turnbull got frightful wind up when he got the mallet back with all that blood on it. He must have guessed the truth. That means the murderer was a member of the syndicate, and I bet I can guess who. You know, *I’m* the nigger in their woodpile, in a manner of speaking. Until I happened to see that lot together at the Blue Finn there was nothing to connect the others with Turnbull.’

‘Ah, but you *did* see them together. Although Turnbull may not have thought there was anything to fear, Jed and Grinsted felt there might be, and tipped him off.’

‘So that’s the bit of knowledge I didn’t realize I had, and that’s why the gipsy tried to kidnap me, is it?’

‘What is more, an earlier attempt by the gipsy failed.’

‘Oh, when he wanted me to go horse-riding and boating? Well, well, well! What do you know?’

‘That it’s time we went to bed,’ said Gavin. ‘But before we go, tell me what you were going to say just as we heard the telephone ring.’

‘Can’t remember... oh, yes. The chestnut and the blue roan.’

‘Enlarge. Expound. You are obscure.’

‘No, I’m not. Perhaps you don’t know, but John Mapsted’s Tennessee and Grinsted’s Iceland Blue were the same horse. When it was the right colour, it ran

as Iceland Blue, and when the gipsy turned it into a chestnut, it ran as Tennessee. But that wasn't it really. No, sorry, I can't work it out. Just as the telephone went I had the glimmering of an idea, but it's gone. Wonder what Mrs Croc has found out? I think I'll go down there tomorrow.'

'You'll go when she sends for you. It isn't healthy for you down there. I only hope *she'll* be all right. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.'

'I don't think she's got a little knowledge. I think she's got all the dope,' retorted Laura. 'It's a habit of hers, if you remember.'

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## CHAPTER TWENTY With the Ladies Inside

*‘And the deep knowledge of dark truths ...’*

Thomas Carew



HAVING sent away Laura, Dame Beatrice went to visit old Mrs Mapsted. Before she set out, however, she telephoned the Chief Constable, at his house, and the Superintendent, at Seahampton police station, and laid certain conclusions before them.

Arrived at Elkstonehunt, Dame Beatrice went straight to the pig-sties, whose occupants, she could tell from the noise, were indicating to their owner that it was feeding time. Old Mrs Mapsted, a yoke across her venerable shoulders, appeared presently with a malodorous couple of buckets from which she tipped sustenance into troughs. A contented sound of sloshing took the place of the earlier mass hysteria of the pigs, and old Mrs Mapsted looked up to see Dame Beatrice standing by.

‘Come and help hump potatoes,’ said the old lady.

‘How did you get Jenkinson’s body to the Seahampton Grammar School?’ demanded Dame Beatrice. Mrs Mapsted looked bewildered.

‘I’ve never been near the Grammar School since Jack left the old building. Understand there’s a new one now. Jack was invited to the official Opening,’ she said.

‘You don’t deny that you administered a large, and (as it turned out) a lethal dose of tetraethyl-thiuram-disulphide to Jenkinson, I suppose?’

‘Jenkinson was a nasty old soak. Was it the Nonalc that finished him?’

There is no actual proof, but I think so. I have read of one or two cases in which a big dose to an unaccustomed stomach turned out to be fatal.’

‘Oh? Well, good riddance to bad rubbish. Cissie Gauberon is always nicking my books. Still, one can’t say it didn’t cure him of his boozing.’

‘I should very much like to know how his body got to the Grammar School, but, since you cannot help me, I now take my leave of you. In the absence of fact, I must rely upon psychology.’

She returned to the Stone House and rang up Mr Bond.

‘Discontented, antagonistic, reactionary and anti-social? Oh, you mean Spencer,’ he replied, in answer to her question. ‘Speak to him? Certainly, Dame Beatrice, if you wish?’

Spencer, for once in his misguided young life, contrite, humble, and, Dame Beatrice gathered, thoroughly alarmed, confessed to his share in the disposal of Jenkinson’s body. He affirmed — and she believed him for reasons other than those he gave her — that he had had no hand in causing Jenkinson’s death, and had not even realized that the man was in a dying condition when they installed him among the plants.

In other words, Laura’s recapitulation of Spencer’s and Turnbull’s activities — conclusions at which Dame Beatrice had arrived independently and more certainly, since, earlier in the case, she had identified the public house which Jenkinson frequented and had noticed how near the new school it was situated — proved to be correct.

Of the death of Turnbull the wretched Spencer denied all guilty knowledge. He admitted that it had ‘put the wind up’ him, as ‘all the gang seemed to be getting it in the neck.’

Dame Beatrice did not press for further details of this rash admission that he himself was mixed up in the crooked running of the racehorses. She rang off. She knew who had murdered Turnbull, and had already given this information to the police. The obvious suspects had been Grinsted, Zozo and Jed Nottingham. Of these, Nottingham had been the one to fall out with him at the Blue Finn and to tell the others that ‘he was a bastard’; Nottingham had been around when Turnbull took flight from the house on the Point to the bungalow by the lasher. It appeared, therefore, that Nottingham was the person who could have known where Turnbull was, and followed him and killed him. The motive was fairly obvious. Turnbull, who had shouted his intention, in Laura’s hearing, of ‘getting out,’ might smash the syndicate by ‘blowing the gaff.’ Nottingham, reckless and unscrupulous, had kept his word and taken Turnbull’s number—a euphemism for his life.

So much for the sordid, inescapable facts, for Nottingham, once the game was up and he was under arrest, did not contest them. There remained the more interesting problems surrounding the deaths of Mapsted and Jenkinson. Dame Beatrice picked up the receiver again and told Laura she might return to the Stone House whenever it suited her, but that she was not to cut short her stay in London if she was enjoying herself.

Gavin was called away to Hereford on a case, as it happened, and so Laura

felt herself at liberty to return to the Stone House at once.

‘It was really providential that he had to leave London,’ she confided to Dame Beatrice when she got back. ‘My curiosity would have killed me if I hadn’t been able to hear your news at once. Has anyone been arrested?’

‘Jed Nottingham for the murder of Mr Turnbull, and, by this time, Miss Gauberon and Miss Trowse for the murder of John Mapsted.’

‘I thought of Jed. It was pretty obviously his work. But — Cissie and Merial? It’s incredible! How did you ferret it out?’

‘I did not — to employ an idiom which, applied to the science of deduction, I deplore — ferret anything out. I merely argued (logically, I hope) from the first fact which seemed to have any significance in a very puzzling case.’

‘Yes?’

‘The fact that, although, upon Jenkinson’s evidence and not contradicted by hers, Miss Gauberon was “up and about” when Percheron began his squealing and so could have reached the horse more quickly than Jenkinson, she did not go to the horse at all. That puzzled me very much as soon as I thought of it.

‘Then came the conflict of evidence about John Mapsted’s movements on the night of his death. On my advice, the police tried to trace the telephone call which John Mapsted is supposed to have made to Miss Gauberon from Seahampton. I need hardly tell you, at this stage, that such a call, which was supposed to be made late at night and so could be easily traced, was never made.’

‘But — if I may interrupt, ma’am,’ said Laura, ‘what of the blood-stained mallet that went back to Seahampton Grammar School! Cissie Gauberon would never have returned it. In any case, how did she get it? Was *she* a member of the syndicate?’

‘No. Mr Spencer has confessed to the mallet. It was a private, not very humorous, practical joke. It was so obviously a red-herring of some sort that I soon ceased to take it seriously. No murderer would have been so insane as to attempt to return it to Turnbull when the obvious thing was to weight it and drop it in Seahampton Channel.’

‘That’s what Gavin and I thought. But the science master found it was human blood.’

‘Boys are accident-prone,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘It’s not difficult to come upon human blood in a boys’ school.’

‘Well! I say, I don’t like Spencer much! Go on about Cissie Gauberon.’

‘I prefer to take the case of Miss Trowse. First, you yourself supplied the

rather interesting information that when you were talking about a *killer-horse*, she jumped to the conclusion that you were talking about a killer-man, and was obviously relieved when she found out her mistake. That looked to me very much like guilty knowledge.

‘She also gave you to understand that Farmer Grinsted’s stallion, Iceland Blue, was a vicious horse. That was a lie, as you very soon found out, and at first I could not see why she had told it. Then it dawned on me that it was to distract your attention there and then from her own establishment and send you off on a wild-goose chase to Grinsted’s farm. From this, I began to wonder whether John Mapsted could possibly have been killed at Hurst St. Johns, and not at the Elkstonehunt stables.’

‘Merial hasn’t a vicious horse, though. Hers are the mildest old crocks.’

‘Nevertheless, the police are making a thorough investigation of her stables. It is no more than a theory of mine at present, but I believe that John Mapsted was bamboozled by Miss Gauberon into going over there that night, inveigled into an empty stable and murdered there.’

‘Coshed — but not necessarily with a mallet?’

‘Yes.’

‘That would be Merial. She’s tall enough, and as tough as they come. But why should she? And why should Cissie Gauberon aid and abet? And how did they get John Mapsted over there?’

‘I can answer your first two questions with a fair degree of certainty, and the answer to the third can be surmised. Old Mrs Mapsted has gone to bed. Her bedtime is an established one. People know when she is certain to be out of the way. The telephone rings — a prearrangement between Gauberon and Trowse. Gauberon goes to John Mapsted. “Poor Merial is in terrible trouble! For goodness’ sake drive me over there at once! No, I can’t tell *you*! You’re a man! But do, for heaven’s sake, be quick!” Something like that, don’t you think?’

‘Oh, yes. That would fetch him. Curiosity alone would do the trick. And he was a good-hearted chap was old John.’

‘That,’ said Dame Beatrice, with unwonted sharpness, ‘is exactly what he was *not*! He was very heartless indeed. I will remind you of two remarks which you reported to me directly after they were made. Old Mrs Mapsted: “It was all I could do to keep that idiot Jack from marrying her.” That is, Cissie Gauberon. And yet Mr Paddy Donegal told you that John Mapsted was going to marry Merial Trowse.’

‘Good heavens!’ said Laura. ‘He was playing with both of them, and didn’t



really intend to marry either! And Merial Trowse is forty-two, and on the rocks financially. Men can be terribly cruel. *Must* you have these wretched women arrested?’

‘A dutiful question, upon my word, for a police officer’s wife to ask! But, you see, dear child, there is Jenkinson to consider. For a short time I put his death at old Mrs Mapsted’s door, but once it became clear that Jenkinson, of all people, would refuse to swallow the story that the horse had killed Mapsted at midnight, and yet had not fussed about it until seven, it also became clear that Jenkinson must be eliminated. He probably expressed himself so plainly to Miss Gauberon that he alarmed her terribly. I don’t suppose that she or Trowse had realized that the doctor would automatically assess the time of death, and so would arouse suspicions that Percheron might not be to blame.’

‘But they couldn’t have *known* that the tetra-stuff would do the trick for Jenkinson, old swill-tub though he was!’

‘I have no doubt that they had other means at their disposal if that one failed, but the beauty of the tetraethyl-thiuram-disulphide was that, if it *did* work, no Coroner’s court could possibly bring in the death as anything but accidental.’

‘Well, what do you know?’ asked Laura — not that she needed an answer.

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

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